Jo Ann Beard beautifully evokes her childhood in the early 60s, a time in which mothers continued to smoke right up to labor, ones own scabs were deeply interesting, and Barbie dolls seemed to get naked of their own volition, knowing that Ken would be the one to get in trouble if they were caught. Beards memories of the next 30 years are no less sharp and wry, powered by antic melancholy, perfect juxtapositions, and the push of love. When she was little, the words of grown-ups rarely made sense, and even now, with the exception of her best friend and a few colleagues, not much seems to have changed. In the title story, Beard and her best friend, now 38, still spend forever on the phone, an activity they perfected in junior high and that is now possible thanks to an office WATS line. Hindsight easily renders their seventh-grade ex nihilo obsession with a ninth grader extraordinaire foolish, along with most encounters with the boys of their youth. But their current relations with men are really no less absurd, as they realize while listening to Beards latest possibility leave an answering-machine message: I dont know whether to faint or kill myself. Elizabeth laughs unbecomingly. I put both hands around my own neck. We are no longer bored. The Boys of My Youth is filled with family picnics, small celebrations, and fragility. Beard knows that her teenage efforts to have a better personality were as futile as her later attempt at practicing being snotty, in anticipation of being dumped by my husband, but that doesnt make her any less fond of her younger self. And she has the same affection, and irritation, for her family, who slowly emerge in story after story. In Waiting, she and her older sister try to keep calm as their mother is dying: I hold two fingers up to remind her of how much longer she needs to keep this up, to pay attention. She holds up one finger, guess which one, to remind me of whos the oldest, whos the boss. I would love more than anything to slap her. There isnt a weak piece in this collection, which includes the worlds most perfect description of the agonies of having your hair washed--at age 3--and the ecstasies of one encounter near the Mexican border. The car is a boiling cauldron. The coyote stands scruffy and skittish, like a wild dingo dog I met once, who bit everything in
sight, wagging his tail like a maniac. Eric slides the camera to me and puts a hand on my arm. He whispers in my ear. I nod. I love dogs better than anything else on earth, next to cigarettes and a couple of people. Beard often edges from serious laughter to high seriousness and back again. The Fourth State of Matter is perhaps the books standout, a narrative about space physicists; invading squirrels; a beautiful, dying dog; a vanished husband; and, alas, a seminar turned 12-minute massacre. On November 1, 1991, she leaves work early and passes by the disappointed graduate student who will later that day gun down eight members of the University of Iowa physics depart. Her piece is complex and heartbreaking, a master conduit of emotion and information. As always, Beard knows the rich value of the minor ritual. Earlier, she had recalled playing Maserati with her collie: Id grab her nose like a gearshift and put her through all the gears, firstsecondthirdfourth, until we were going a hundred miles an hour through town. She thought it was funny. After the newslady finally confirms her colleagues deaths, Maserati again figures: We sit by the tub. She lifts her long nose to my face and I take her muzzle and we move through the gears slowly; first second third fourth, all the way through town, until what has happened has happened and we know it has happened.

This book is so moving, so painfully touching. I read it over a weekend and could hardly put it down. As I read it, I kept on thinking of friends that I wanted to lend it to afterwards, but the more I read, the more I thought, This books not leaving my sight; Ill tell my friends they have to buy their OWN copies. Jo Ann Beard is so poetic; she doesnt so much tell stories as offer brilliant vignettes of critical times in her life. She talks to the reader like he or shes a second self; she makes herself extremely vulnerable in this book. Her memories of childhood are so acute and observed so perfectly through a childs eyes--like being at an open-casket funeral and only being able to see the nose and glasses of the deceased from where she sits. I nearly caused a scene on the bus reading the Dirty Barbies story, because I was laughing so loud. Being a male, I have never been given so much insight into what its like to grow up female as I was given in this book. Its a brilliant collection of stories--evocative, faithful in the tiniest but most telling of details. I couldnt stop thinking about it when I had finished it. Its a wonder.

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