

Wrestling Bears: A Nonbinary Epic Poem (The First 39 Stanzas)

by

K.M. Usher

1 — I got a bellyful of all the times I have been mistaken for a man here in Louisiana. Most occurred in the restroom of a riverboat casino where I worked as a blackjack dealer. There was the Kroger store incident. One time on Facebook a random guy declared my face was too pointy and boney for me to be a cisgendered female. One spring day in Bossier City a hardware store owner called me “sir.”

It could be because of lusty energy crackling from me when I’m out in the world. Or maybe it’s because my fingernails are clipped close, my hair is short and uncolored, I don’t wear makeup, most days I wear practical and butch looking brown Teva sandals, and I have big feet and hands. In binary world, little is female. Big is male.

I have seen older married heterosexual couples who look alike — soft and non-gender specific. Years of togetherness smashes them alike in a sticky rice way. They are happy pushing the shopping cart in unison.

2 — What are my pronouns?

3 — January 9, 2015 Facebook post.

Kroger. Tomato paste aisle. Tiny lady in a purple sweat suit says "Sir."

At the same time she realizes I'm not a sir, I realize she's talking to me. I keep walking and say "no problem."

But then I turn around 'cause she's really small --- like Italian grandma bitty. She's still staring at the Grand Canyon top row of cans. Obviously she still needs a man...

4 — “Hello, world, doggone ya!” W.K. Henderson boomed in 1926 when he signed on radio station KWKH AM Shreveport.

5 — ... or a woman with a Mohawk. I walk back and smile sweetly (I quickly dug out my old Miss Congeniality beauty pageant days pleasy face) "Do you need me to reach something?" I guess she's a little throwed I'm not mad — but dang — I've misgender ID'd folks before and I know how bad I felt.

"Could you reach two of those on the top?" She points with a purple fingernail.

I reach with a right hand full of chewed off nails. "These?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Sure. No problem." I spin around and clomp off down the aisle. I am wearing my black scruffy man boots, after all. It is a cold winter day here in the South.

6 — At three and a half I rescued Dad. A man smacked him in the back of the head —KAPOW! — and pulled him downward. I stopped the attack. This happened in Joplin, Missouri.

7 — At forty-eight I did not save my husband. This happened in Shreveport, Louisiana.

8 — My daughter is twenty-three and living at home when I kill her father. She rolls her eyes and says, "Do not say that." I feel responsible because I didn't stop him from unintentionally ending his life with a poly pharmaceutical overdose.

9 — The legacy for the daughter of K.M. Usher and Charles Fontane is swaddled in this ledger of events. Cradling memories like gumbo pots of chicken and sausage, walls painted Valspar Peek-A-Boo Blue and a used bright pink Honda Civic that stayed broken down.

During the next to the last day K.M. is twenty-three, they become pregnant with Katee. Ten years after televangelist Oral Roberts talked to a 900-foot Jesus, Katee slips from their body like a slinky down stairs at Roberts' City of Faith Medical Center. The golden multi-towered hospital sits next to one of the country's most controversial universities, Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma. A sixty-foot-high bronze sculpture of praying hands stands in front of the shiny erections. One hand is modeled from Oral's hand, the other from his son, Robert.

10 — The daughter may do with the legacy what she wishes (I have the most beautiful daughter). No trust is in place to control or colonize her adult life. There is no named building for the daughter, only intellectual property.

11— Names on edifices are legacies of rich people. My husband with his pain management doctors passed the Sackler family dollar bills stacked prescription bottle high so the Sackler's could attach their name to establishments like The Guggenheim Sackler Center for Arts Education and the Sackler Room at the National Gallery in London. How many filled thirty day prescriptions does it take to construct those seven rooms named Sackler at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City?

12 — For the wedding in 1986 on Caddo Lake, K.M.'s parents rented a blue plastic-molded cubicle with a chemical toilet inside. A homemade sign taped to the door read "The Jerry and Kitti Room."

13 — A friend hand-lettered the front of our wedding invitations. Inside the invites I drew a map with a thick black marker to show the location of the lake house. At the radio station where I worked as the sports director I used a typewriter to add the particulars — "Fontane/Usher wedding begins at 8PM. Allow enough time for driving, parking, and setting up your chair.

House is on stilts and has a pool in front. You will know when you are there. Hot dog and marshmallow roast begins after the wedding." I stuffed paper the color of blond butter roux into the station's copier to make thirty duplicates to share with friends and family.

14 —2004 letter from husband (I had the most beautiful husband).

"Be happy my love, go for your dreams and don't let me or your Family or anyone else stop you. You're on a higher plain than us and it's hard for us to see where you want to go, so through love and fear we try to drag you down to our level where we think it's safe. You can't tell us where you want to go Baby (so quit trying) but you can show us, so just do it. Thank you for being the most beautiful, Loving, Wonderful wife and Friend in the world. Forever I'll love you. Charlie."

15 — October 18, 2017 StoryCorps interview (archived).

Jerry Ellwood Usher (87) tells his daughter, Kathryn Usher (54) about being a professional wrestler, traveling for his job, wrestling a bear, and meeting famous wrestlers like André the Giant and Hulk Hogan.

16 — I do not have a recording of my husband reading his letter to me.

17 — Dad left me a modest bit of insurance money along with a sweat stained gym bag of knowledge. He showed me the correct form for a bench press and trained me on the best way to wrestle bears. He didn't leave me named structures.

18 — Professional wrestling is never fake. It is about real stories being told. Good vs evil. In the ring, drama and artistry unfold. French philosopher Roland Barthes said wrestling is a spectacle and "it is no more ignoble to attend a wrestled performance of suffering than a performance of the sorrows of Arnolphe or Andromaque."

19 — There are two kinds of stories. A stranger comes to town. A person goes on a journey (and

in doing so becomes the stranger who comes to town). The widow transmogrified into the stranger who comes to town. The widow, without leaving town, became the stranger.

"Since their husband died, they changed."

20 — On an autumn Wednesday, with a narrow transport chair, I rolled my blind father along a ramp into an aluminum Airstream travel trailer parked next to a library hugged by a bayou and Live Oak trees. The Airstream housed a compact recording studio — the StoryCorps MobileBooth.

21 — How Dad tells the story of the night I saved him (recorded in an Airstream).

“One time we were up in Joplin, Missouri, and one of the masked men didn’t show up. And Bob Clay, the promoter, said, ‘Jerry, would you mind putting the mask on and work?’ I said sure Bob I love to work. So anyhow I'm over there and this man got me all tied up and I heard somebody beating on the apron and I said what in the heck is that and this little voice said ‘Don’t you hurt my daddy. Don’t you hurt my daddy.’ Guess who it was, Kathryn?”

“Who was it?” I ask.

“It was you.”

“It was me?”

We laugh.

“Yep.”

“So I recognize even though you have the mask on...”

“There you go...”

“...I recognize it was you.”

22 — "As Ray Stevens, a legendary wrestler and a longtime friend, once told me, ‘If it's worth

tellin', it's worth colorin' up a bit.' And that, in a nutshell, is the wrestling business.” Terry Funk.

Second generation wrestler.

23 — How I tell the story of the night I saved Dad (typed on an iPhone).

To my left, next to his folding chair, my older brother had a stash of used red and white wax paper Coke cups. The after wrestling matches ritual for kids was to run around the rows of folding chairs with handfuls of scavenged cups. We flipped them upside down on the floor and then stomped them to see who could make the loudest POP. On my other side, Mom had her head dipped next to the wrestler’s wife seated by her. They smoked cigarettes and laughed.

In the ring, Daddy had on all black. Mask, shirt, trunks, tights and boots. A heel. His opponent wore a white mask, trunks and boots. A babyface.

The babyface pulled Daddy’s head down. Daddy jerked the man’s forearms to break the hold. It didn't work. The babyface pushed Daddy down and jumped on his back. WHOMP! Daddy slapped the mat and howled. I peered at Mom and John. They didn’t realize our patriarch needed saving. I peeled my legs off the chair and flew to the ring as fast as my brown corrective shoes allowed. I pounded on the apron side. “Don’t you hurt my daddy! Don’t you hurt my daddy!”

The referee stopped the match. Daddy untangled himself and hopped out of the ring.

“Daddy!” I wrapped my arms around his tights covered legs and breathed in his woody Aramis cologne. He scooped me into his chest, grabbed the ring rope with one hand, and bounced back into the spotlight. The audience chanted “Ba-by! Ba-by! Ba-by!”

Daddy shaded his eyes with his right hand and looked around. “Where is your mother?”

I fluttered my fingers over the crowd, indicating out there somewhere. The audience roared. I looked at the people in the big hall. These people loved me. I loved them! I liked being in the middle of the action. Maybe I could get big and be a man wrestler.

24 —Novelist Harry Crews was a toddler in Bacon County, Georgia when his father died.

Something so peculiar happened after he passed, Harry's momma reached for a gun to protect herself and her babies. Myrtrice Turner recalled, "I would say it was a month after my husband died, somebody come to my back door and it was fastened with a chain and they rattled the chain like they were trying to come in. I didn't have nothing but a shotgun but I just stuck that thing out the window and shot it. I didn't hear no more. I reckon they decided we better leave her alone."

25 —Southerners speak the language of violence. Maybe for protection down here we ought to issue guns to widows. I didn't have a gun. I struggled with standing my ground and defending myself. How different all this would have played out had I blasted away out the window.

26 — In the 1969 movie "True Grit" there is a scene set in an Indian Territory meadow. John Wayne is alone on a horse and he confronts four bad guys on horses. Wayne shoves his horse's reins in his teeth, grabs his six-shooter and his rifle and charges the bad guys as he fires. But before he chomps down on the reins he shouts, "Fill your hands, you son of a bitch."

27 — I'm still piecing together how people on the edges of my life decided I flipped from babyface to heel after my husband died. Their blackguarding is connected to the person I chose to love and how I use my voice. Reinvention of self during widowhood is human. There were people in this conservative Southern community who were not comfortable with the ways I expressed myself. I became the resident picked-on outsider. Fuck. Most days I laid flat

and eked along making carpet angels. I grappled to find a sliver of liberty in this suffocating bleakness.

28 — The hypothesis the widow considers is, if they had not fallen in love with a specific individual in their neighborhood and if they had gotten a job, say for instance, running the cash register at the Southern Maid Donuts near the fairgrounds, would the confederates of this coterie have left them alone? Did their passion for this new person in their life (more about them later), and their continued question asking and art making, anger these red-state confederates?

"Since their husband died, they changed."

29 — "Fill your hands, you sons uh bitches."

30 — This decade-long scrap wounded me. I never ventured from my front porch and an "Odyssey" unfolded. To survive, I deadlifted what my father gave me. The red lift straps on my wrists cut deep when I leaned back into his advice of "keep your dauber up" — wrestling jargon for keep your chin up.

31 — "I'm originally from Shreveport, Louisiana, a blue-collar, violent, religious home."

Jericho Brown. Pulitzer Prize-winning poet.

32 — Brown says you don't get to be a poet without publicly asking questions that people say it's rude to answer in public. I agree and would add, journalists also ask those same sorts of inconvenient questions. Maybe all writers explore uncomfortable truths.

33 — Dad was born in Tulsa in 1929. I was born in Tulsa in 1963. I lived in Shreveport in the 1990s when I first heard about the Tulsa Race Massacre. Until then I hadn't heard or read a single story about this catastrophic event. I lived a large portion of my first twenty years just a few miles from where it erupted. No one in my family discussed it. Institutionalized white supremacy meant in Oklahoma history classes we learned about land runs. Boomer. Sooner.

34 — Oklahoma State Song (partial).

“We know we belong to the land,
And the land we belong to is grand.”

35 — Louisiana State Song. In June 2021, Allen Toussaint's song "Southern Nights" became an official state song of Louisiana.

The previous state song was written by Charles Fontane's great aunt, Doralice Fontane, a composer and entrepreneur. In the 1950s she turned her Baton Rouge home, a few doors down from what then was the Governor's Mansion, into a house of weddings. Fontane's song became the official state song in 1970. "Give Me Louisiana" had such lyrics as "a state of old tradition, old plantation days, makes good old Louisiana, the sweetest of all states."

36 — Allen Toussaint's Louisiana State Song (partial).

“Have you ever noticed Southern skies? (In southern skies)
Its precious beauty lies
Just beyond the eye it goes running through your soul
Like the stories told of old”

37 — Toussaint released "Southern Nights" in 1975. The songwriter said the lyrics were inspired by childhood visits to his relatives in the Louisiana countryside. He remembered staring at night skies filled with sequin-silver stars. In 1977 Glen Campbell released his version.

38 — In the 1970s I knew about Campbell because Mom listened to country music. She took us to Broken Arrow's 51 Drive-in when “True Grit” played in August 1971. My oldest brother was 14, I was 8, Brett was 4, and Barry was 3. The movie had John Wayne for Mom. Campbell was

also in it. And Kim Darby played a teenager who rode astride her own horse while hunting down the man who murdered her father.

Before we piled in the car Mom shook a big pot of popcorn over a burner on the stove. After the kernels exploded, she added salt and poured them into a cloudy white Tupperware bowl. Mom didn't burp the lid closed until she took the pickle jar out of the ice box and wiped the juice from five pickles. She laid them in the center of the popcorn, where they made a slightly moist indentation.

39 — She was the parent who took us to drive-ins. Dad wouldn't go. For work he spent endless days and nights crammed in a car with other wrestlers bumping from one arena to the next. They logged thousands of miles every week. When he was home he avoided cars.

Mom loved cars and driving fast.

A decade after the birth control pill became available, after she birthed four children, and experienced several miscarriages, Mom found parking-space-sized chunks of liberation at drive-in movies.

Movies under stars eliminated the need for her unpaid labor of herding kids in an indoor theater.

With us corralled in the car, Mom stole back some of her freedom, measuring it out one titchy road-trip at a time through the hills of Green Country.