



family portraits

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Deb Allbery

THE THREE STORIES MY MOTHER TOLD ME ABOUT HERSELF

1

This was before electricity
finally came to New Lex,
before oil rigs dotted
the southern Ohio hillsides like
strange grazers--it was '52 and my mom
was still laughing and angular
in angora sweaters and plaid skirts,
riding the bus miles with her sisters
and brothers, and then walking
back and back down the dirt road
to their farm. One day
that December they came home
to find their house had burned
to the ground, and my grandma
waiting there in front of the stone
foundation, holding a Bible
and two dresses on hangers.
It was almost Christmas and
neighbors took them in by twos
or threes, gave them food,
clothes, tree ornaments.
And I waited for my mom to tell me
how it was probably their best
Christmas ever but she didn't,
she said in the snow
and ashes they found
small bright mounds of all
my grandpa's savings, melted
silver and some gold.

Deb Allbery/The Three Stories...

2

In the spring the gypsies
made the rounds and word
passed fast among the merchants
and townspeople of New Lex.
One April Saturday
my mom starts out
for the Gary Cooper matinee
in town, and my nervous
grandma calls after her:
*Don't be long now, don't be
late. Gypsies are camped
along the backroads.* But what
you expect in a story of this
kind: my mom dawdles
after the picture show--
buys a Chocola at Risch's
Drug, runs her fingers
over the fur collars at Kresge's,
sprays on a few perfumes.
So it's getting dark
as she walks home. She starts
hearing things
in the woods--then she's sure
she sees a man and breaks
into a run, trips on gravel,
and the strong arms
helping her up are my grandpa's.
He's also brought her dog
Frisky who growls toward
the woods as they walk
home not saying much.

Deb Allbery/The Three Stories...

3

This is the story of her high school
yearbook, the *Aviator* 1955,
which she would take down from her closet
for me--I can still
see page after page of faces,
grim groups, candid. My mom
as majorette, with curled bangs and baton,
her name written neat across her skirt
on the photo, i dotted with a circle.
A graduating class of twenty,
and she told me eventually
what she knew of their fates--
one to college but most staying there
in factories, brickyards, strip mining,
marriage and at least one of them
dead now, Chester "Happy" Nye, whose Senior
Prophecy read: *Hap, Heaven knows,
is selling refrigerators to Eskimos.*

Under my mom's senior picture
it said: *She leaves a string
of broken hearts.* One night my friend
Mary and I were looking through it
laughing and my mom put the yearbook away
for good. Also her shoebox of pictures
from those years, small creased prints
of old boyfriends and cars and my
favorite: Mom squinting sidewise
at the camera, hand on cocked hip, and my dad
skinny and half-formal beside her but laughing,
a cigarette pointing down from one hand,
and gray Frisky waiting in the tilted road.

She hid all those, but in her cedar
jewelry box were still the silver
dollars from 1923 and the two
inch-long Scottish terriers--one white,
one black, each glued to a magnet--
which I'd get out sometimes

Deb Allbery/The Three Stories...

when she was gone. She never
told me where they came from and I
never played with them very long.
They made me feel the way I felt
when I looked at that smiling
picture of Happy Nye.

Deb Allbery/The Three Stories...

4

By this time I'd stopped
hanging around while she ironed
or did dishes, I asked less
questions and had fewer
answers for hers. I sat
on the shoes in my closet
and talked into the diaries
she started giving me
when I was twelve. I locked them
with their thin keys, inked
Private Keep Out all over
their floral covers. Inside
I wrote in code. I hid the keys
in a new place each week.

When my mother wrote letters
to her parents she'd do them over
five or six times until
she'd written out everything
that might worry Grandma.
She ripped the first tries
diagonally and in half,
in half, and I'd piece them
together, filling in what was
missing, looking for my name
and for what she'd crossed out.
Sometimes, too, there would be notes
to herself--how alone she was,
why didn't her children let her
know things. Or she'd scatter
her full name several times
exactly alike. I was careful putting
the pieces back in the wastebasket,
she could never tell.

Deb Allbery

I CALL MY YOUNGER SISTER LONG-DISTANCE

*You're at about Stage Three, she judges
with a bitter laugh she's learned
from the soaps, and I'm biting back
each denial. What a weak thing*

*this optimism seems. Look I hope
it works out for you really
I do, she mumbles lighting a cigarette
between her words, her doubts, and it's true*

*she's been around some, and mostly
all I know about men is they leave.
They feel tied down fast,
they don't have a sense of humor*

*like mine. He's different,
is all I can say from my side,
and she clips Ok, alright. Inhales
and exhales Just hold something back
ok, for yourself? Make him worry
sometimes, keep him guessing, God
you know how you are. Take care, stay
in touch. When we were kids*

*I'd cry at circus animal tricks--
dressed-up dogs jumping through hoops,
tigers ridiculous on their hind legs,
and my sister would tell me stories*

*about the kind owners and their animals,
those happy elephants, well-fed ponies,
monkeys on warm blankets, she'd say
Don't cry you'll make me cry.*

Grace Bauer

POEM FOR ANOTHER WALLENDIA

As his foot slipped from the wire
the old man realized
he had always lived
for just this moment.
He'd been born to hurtle
through this painless air.

From the beginning he knew
following his father's footsteps
was not his safest move.
And he had warned his own son,
who also chose to walk the wire--
They had all refused a net.

Now, as he reaches solid ground
and takes his first bow,
a boy sighs amid applause.
He looks back to see
his grandfather, his father,
his own foot slipping from the wire.

Grace Bauer

THE OLD MENNONITE SURVEYS HIS LAND

My father painted the distilfink
on the side of that barn
back around 1880.

Year after year
weather fades out the colors
and year after year
we re-paint it.
Still, I wonder
if we haven't been hexed.

For my father, this farm
was space enough
to grow in; he was satisfied
with what you might call simple.

Each Saturday
he'd load the buggy
and we'd head for the market
in Lancaster to sell
his home-cured
hams and scraple; mama sold
her guides to salvation
and shoo-fly pies.

Both my sons have gone
to the city. They work
in factories and drive
new cars. They live in
well lit houses
owned by strangers.

We shake our heads,
"Was kamme do? Was kamme do?"
We slowly die off.
The past washes away
like dust in rain.

Michel Englebert

FOUR ON FLOYD PATTERSON

1

When he was eight he took a razorblade
to the photograph his mother kept of him.

*On Fridays my father would bring home his pay
and lay it on the table. He was so tired,
that while my mother cooked he fell asleep.
I would take off his shoes and wash his feet.
That was my job.*

2

When Sandra finally told him
the delivery boy had been calling her 'Babe'
he phoned the store and ordered the boy down
insisting that Sandra be there when, taking his arm,
he shoved him against the washing machine.

*You call her Mrs. Patterson.
Or Sandra if you know her but you don't.
So call her Mrs. Patterson.*

It made Sandra angry with him.
The boy would give poor service from then on.
You are away so much, she told him.
I am the one who has to get along here.

Michel Englebert/Four on Floyd Patterson

3

Some kids were picking on Jeannie again.
Floyd planned on waiting for them after school.
They were old enough, he said, to pay dues.

You been lifting my daughter's dress?
Nope, the boy said, unintimidated.
Now boys were all around the car
and several white parents turned their heads.

You might mean my little brother,
but he was just touching it a little.
Patterson nodded. The boys turned
walking calmly up the street in a group.

4

After Liston beat me in Nevada I started thinking:
I didn't have to run that extra mile;
could have had a drink instead, slept with a woman;
I could have fought that night in no condition.

I remember trying to get up and the referee saying
You all right? and me answering quick
Of course I'm all right. But he frowned
and asked me what my name was
and I said Patterson is...Patterson.

Gary Fincke

WHERE WE USED TO BE

Along Angle Alley, the bricks slippery
In the rain, the third floor rooms running up
Under the roof where the heat smelled like socks.
Some nights the mongrel cats squalled on the wall,
Taking the cliff's edge dare like drug-store hoods,
Bluffing until they had to swear and leap
And drag each other yowling into space.

Where polio strangled the boy downstairs,
Where Judy dreamed her way out the window
And our father burst through the full glass door
On his hysterical run to the roof.
All that time my room was changing into
The withered church that touches old widows
Whose mute husbands worked the doomed Armco plant.

Now I want to slip behind the altar
To side arm stones across Grant Avenue,
Slapping out windshields to test the terror
That drove me upstairs under the blankets.
Now I am not convincing my children
I lived above the alley, that I was
Punched breathless inside the unused garage
Where a thin drunk fractured his skull and screamed
Like a night cat. Later, I vomited
The macaroni soup. My children shake
Their heads. What swill is that? Who is this man
Pointing up the street toward Nicolazza's
And Perkowski's where fat girls in their teens
Hold babies and bray afternoon complaints?

Sometimes we stood at the attic window
And watched the mill's red sky. "That is the way
We will end," mother said, "turning to flame,"
And she held me out over that long fall
To the red brick alley, trusting us both
To stay aloft in the overworked night.

Michael Finley

A MELTING POT

My mother's father didn't come over on the Titanic--a man with a temper, he lost his ticket in a pub fight in Bristol. I can see him drizzling Jameson's into his coffee. When I was a boy he named a calf after me. Two years later he slaughtered it. At his funeral I walked just behind the pallbearers.

My father's father was diabetic, I dreamed of him once bursting like a fountain, his life sailing out through a thousand needle-holes. He was a calmer man. A neighbor's boy ran wild with the family's Model T and struck my grandfather's favorite riding horse. Grandfather not only shot his horse, he paid to fix the car.

Half a century passes, and my mother is driving home late from her job as waitress. A doe bolts into her beams. I awake in the night to hear voices, witness through the venetian blinds as the deer is hung by its heels from the apple tree. Bread knife in hand, my grandfather makes the first cut. The great heart tumbles onto snow.

My parents married too young. The war. My father chafed at living in his in-laws' house. He and grandmother didn't get along. I can see her at table, cleaning a bird--the hands zip open pale skin, a thumb pulls the still-soft egg into light. Grandmother holds it up to my father and smiles.

On the television, men spade other men up from a peach orchard in Marin County. My Uncle John is one of them, a wanderer under wet leaves. In Milwaukee my father gazes at a photo album--Irish faces, women and girls, blue and green eyes gone bronze into time, with names like Mary, Grace and Rose.

My father's mother is in a home in Milwaukee, eight years after the first stroke. When she sees me, she knows me as Mike O'Riordan, as Jack, as Pat, as

Michael Finley/A Melting Pot

her son and my father, as Paul. How are the girls? Especially the youngest, and the son away at seminary. In my grandmother's heart I live freely and all at once through four and five generations.

The cousins drive me to the motel. They talk of senility, psychosis, the strokes. I can't listen to them. I feel washed through time as my grandmother's mind. She spoke the truth--and now she is practically gone herself, strangely soft for so aged an animal, making infant sounds deep inside her.

Pamela Harrison

PIANO LESSON

*The stars move still, time runs, the
clock will strike/The devil will come...*

Christopher Marlowe

Now I bathe
in the afternoon as Mother did,
warm water drawn in a murmurless house,
knees afloat above their bare reflection
breasts like whitened reefs
below a shine rippling slick
against the cool enamel, pale waves
circling in a box.

Did she rehearse in silence
washing, watching water
trickle from her cloth?
I saw her always with a prop,
the broom, a spoon, a dishtowel
in the doorway as I practiced
after school. She drove me
all the way cross town
for "lessons with the best,"
to a place where seascapes glowed
on darker walls and two grand
black pianos, spiked with vases,
edged furniture into private rooms.
Just ten minutes late, I understood,
Miss Meister would not let me in.
Beyond the door I'd see her, rigid
in a buttoned chair, star sapphire
flashing on her tapping hand. We
had to leave our house by four.
I'd stumble up and down the keys
while Mother parked beneath pale
leaves curled in upon themselves
against the searing light. Chin sunk
upon the wheel, she memorized the street
down which she stared, waiting
for my talents to improve.

Pamela Harrison/Piano Lesson

Last night I dreamed again
I rounded down the spiral stair
whose chiseled courses closed
rough and umber toward a dark
presence, coiled and breathing.
On every side the grim stench rose.
Hard scales burned across my back,
out of my throat, and I
woke screaming down the long hall.
Had she counted on my goodness?

Where do ripples end that start
in breezes from some sandy shore
then move through waters
and in the moving magnify
until they tower in tidal waves
raised like dragon snakes
to strike and level houses? A little girl

tries to miss her lesson
calculating innocence. She plays
better than she thought she knew,
charming her mother to forget the time.
Children's magic, to think they have such power.

Practicing deception, she listens for the clock,
Sits straight to reach the pedal and to play
A *Fur Elise* so fine she will suspend time's hasty tock

And tick of ebony over ivory. Quick spider flock
Her fingers spin a song so sure she surely may
Contrive a web that beats a lesson by the clock.

She's head that music has some magic to unlock
The seconds' power, by silver threads waylay
The giant's steady breathing tick and tock.

Pamela Harrison/Piano Lesson

Melody and measure free the gate and granite block.
Past dragons dreaming on their heaped array,
She casts a spell that stills the twitching clock.

Our several musics make time fast or slow, not cock
That crows so smugly up the ruffled sleeve of day,
Not cold cartwheeling stars, not wooden tick or tock.

Then she was done, and stranded like a rock
Amid the stream that tumbled fast and on its way
Forever fading like the chiming of a clock
Marching us before it with its trick of tick and tock.

An alabaster Beethoven sneers
from the shelf. Her notes
flee up the stairs; flames
light about the pedals
and her heels. Pausing

before the brassy knob
that held her upside down,
a girl watched woodgrain
rise like smoke above her head
then called into the dark.
Had she heard? Was she playing
solitaire? All the long blue
curtains drawn, furniture
hunched hard against the wall,
her slippers heeled
beside the bathroom door.

Sunlight rebounded
from polished glass
and off the row of square
white tile. It glowed
like rubies on the water
and the water's scarlet rippling
round and round her white face
floating like an island in a flood.

Pamela Harrison/Piano Lesson

I've read about a woman
sitting in her car, lonely
like the yellow flicker
of a taper, suddenly
burning in her clothes.
I think about it sometimes,
catching fire, as though thinking
could by concentration
make a flame. I wonder

could the water put it out,
lapping about my chin and toes,
falling like this trickle in the tub
dripping from my wrists
soothing and insistent as a rain
that pocks the hollows of a road
streaked with oily rainbows
and the slow arpeggios
of pale, suffocating worms.

Marcia L. Hurlow

WAITING

Ashland, Oregon, May 20, 1980

A night of thin silence;
the air greys and gasps dust,
the black bird finds the scent
of its grandfather, an empty nest.

The blood has dried, the anger
calmed between us. We sit alone, wait
for the promise of the overturned
leaf, its silver veins empty:

Grandmother said this was a sign
of rain; we are to frail to trust--
we cough in the ash of her memory.

Arthur Winfield Knight

CEREMONIALS

For the first week
my parents visit us
my father sits
in front of the stove
as if he hopes the heat
will burn away the cold
he caught photographing
a blizzard in Wyoming.
This is the price he pays
for his art.

Four of us share the house
24 hours a day,
and there are five of us
when my daughter comes home
from nursery school.

It seems as if
I have never been alone,
never held my wife
without strange noises
on the other side of our door.

My mother vacuums
everyday,
and I hear the roar
of the machine
as I sit on the toilet
composing poems.
No place is sacred.

Arthur Winfield Knight/Ceremonials

In the evenings
there are three generations
grouped ceremonially
around the television;
the dream of family
finally fulfilled
in the arc of a cathode ray.
These are the quiet times,
conversations circumscribed
by commercial interruptions.
Each statement is an epiphany.

Suzanne M. Levine

HOW SHE SEES HERSELF

at thirteen mirrors
are indispensable she
opts for the opaque dormer

window reflection although
she'll roll an eye in any
direction that casts

a shadow shade of her
she is everything all
that is invariably this

makes life explosive
and dull depending
on which side of

thirteen she is
every moment weighing
the enormity she is sure

I don't
give a damn about
my girl at thirteen

Tia Maytag

DEAD LEAVES

My mother was arrested last week after escaping from the convalescent home and taking a motel room without the money to pay. There was no reason for any questioning, but she stated that she had a confession. The officer told me that she held herself very proudly with her arms stuck forward to accept the handcuffs. She said that she had killed her family to be with her lover and was there at the motel waiting for him. Who is this lover, they asked, letting her believe that she had taken them in. You cannot force me to reveal his name, she said.

They thought my presence would help reorient her. Instead the only thing she did was to give me a bulging envelope of photographs and say, I am giving up my identity. Afterwards she was as placid as any other occupant of the home.

Inside the envelope were photographs of our family with no particular order or relationship to each other. We had never put together albums anyway, but tossed photographs into a drawer. In the last house my mother and I gathered most of them up in handfuls and stuffed them into the garbage like dead leaves.

The truth there might have been in her "confession" hit me unawares. I was nowhere near the ocean which is where we had always lived, but 32,000 feet above the earth where oceans and states are flat immobile patches. I shuffled the photographs like a deck of cards and saw spaces between them.

I have always said I don't have a good memory, but people want to know your earliest memory like part of a parlor game. I have heard people say they remember the womb, or

Tia Maytag/Dead Leaves

not being able to talk, but they like my earliest memory because I was very close to death.

I am four, squatting close to the ocean, and I am small enough in size so that when a wave rolls in it carries me out with it. There is a horrible stifling sensation--no, I might have made that up--and a man's hands pressing on my stomach and a shower of water from my mouth. Someone on the beach knew me and took me home. My mother is wild. She runs out the front door with tears rolling down her face and thanks the people over and over again while she holds me. I am put in a hot bath and then tucked in tightly, as if there is still the possibility of my drowning and I must be tied down. My father comes home and sits on the edge of the bed and strokes my hair. On the other side of the wall I can hear the anger in his voice, though he is trying to control it. She was gone before I knew it, my mother says. The house is very quiet all night--which is unusual.

There are pictures of my mother in front of six different houses. Most of them were taken the first day when she was still smiling with the change and possibilities. There are two photographs of Mother bending over flats of flowers that she will set in beds alongside the house. By the second week, though, the same plants will be shriveled and stucco from the walls of the house flakes over them like snow.

All the houses were in the same city, all of them could have been variations of the same model. But each time we went to look she would say, oh, this one is much better! After a few months, or sometimes only days, she would hate the house. It was responsible for the way she

Tia Maytag/Dead Leaves

felt: it was claustrophobic because it was too small, it was too close to the ocean and everything was damp, or it was too far from the water and she missed the soothing sound of the waves.

At different times in his life my father sold televisions, insurance, clothes, and building supplies. When he had enough money we moved again.

A childhood picture of my mother: she stands in a ceramic shell in a frontyard fountain. At ten she is already voluptuous. It isn't because she has breasts, but her body has curves and her pose suggests the future. The smile.

A photograph of my mother and father: he wears an army flight jacket with wings pinned on the collar. Her arm is through his and her hair is dark and curled. He never got to fly because the war ended. If you had stayed in the army we wouldn't be in this mess, is what she would say when bills covered the kitchen table.

In each new house she gave a cocktail party once she became bored with the newness of the house itself. She spent money we didn't have to rent glasses and buy food and alcohol. She bought a new dress and frantically pinned up the curtains she got at thrift stores that never fit our windows.

There isn't a photograph of this: waking in the night to the sound of the rented glasses crashing against the wall because my father is drunk and angry. In the morning, Mother had swept up the glass, but stains ran down the walls.

At each party she moved among the husbands looking for someone new. Women were never her friends. One time after a party when I was twelve, she said, I may be leaving town with someone. A phone call came later and she was gone for one night.

A picture of Mother in her bathing suit:

Tia Maytag/Dead Leaves

it reminds me of a particular day that I know in full detail. My mother rises out of the ocean like Aphrodite. (In the legend of Aphrodite's creation the foam is made from the severed genitals of Uranus.) Men stare at her. Her wet suit shows her body. She walks over to where my brother and I sit in the sand and stands over us, dabbing the water from her face and hair. Then she lets the towel coast to the sand and she stretches out on top of it.

All of a sudden there is a wind that rips the pages of magazines, and curls the edges of towels around the sunbathing bodies. An umbrella rattles down the beach. Mother stands and tries to hold her hair back from her face, but the wind takes it out of her hands. She wrestles with her shift and tells us to hurry. I lift my towel and sand blows in her face. Because of the wind I can't hear what she says, but her hand comes out to slap me and is drawn back before it touches my skin. As we walk up the stairs she smiles at the people we pass.

In the rearview mirror of the battered station wagon, she combs her hair with her fingers. The wind whistles through the windows that don't roll up all the way.

At home we eat peanut butter sandwiches on the kitchen table--no plates. She moves through the house pulling curtains against the fog that is rolling in. Fog makes her claustrophobic. The curtains are bright, gaudy material. They are too long and narrow for the windows. The couch is covered with a bedspread and she tucks it in.

There is a photograph of me standing in front of a billboard advertising a reconstructed settler village. My mother said we were going shopping, but she pulled everything out of our drawers and stuffed them into suitcases. My brother was at school, my father was at work. No, she says, we are going to take a trip and visit your aunt.

Tia Maytag/Dead Leaves

Until we are out of the city, she watches the rearview mirror. She puts maps in my lap. Tell me how to get there, she says. I look through the new maps, but I don't know how to read them. Find the numbers on the roads, she says impatiently. I find numbers, but I still don't understand. I don't see St. Louis. Finally, in exasperation she pulls over to the side of the road where this billboard is. She grabs the maps from my hands and is silent. She tells me to get out of the car after she refolds the maps and puts them down on the car seat. I posed for the picture in front of the billboard because she said we might as well get something out of this. When we get back in the car she turns around. The sun goes. I watch her profile, the way her eyes light up in the headlights of oncoming cars.

There is another picture of me at thirteen swamped in a sweater sizes too large, my own body foreign in too much fat, and my face miserable with my own sensation of ugliness. There are no photographs of my brother who never came home after he turned sixteen, and so has been forgotten. Nor are there any others of my father who also left when I was eighteen and had just escaped myself the way my mother always tried to by driving down the road endlessly with no particular place to go.

Each time I flash through the photos something gets clearer as if the motion is the crystal of a hypnotist. What I remember is earlier than sitting next to the ocean before the wave comes up. The same day. We were at home alone. If you weren't here, she says, stepping over me to pull the curtains open, I would run off with my lover. But, she says, he doesn't like kids. She moves impatiently through the house, opening drawers, removing nothing, and then closing them again. She talks to me, but doesn't look at me.

She sits down at her vanity which moved from house to house like a shrine, wearing white shorts

Tia Maytag/Dead Leaves

and a red blouse that is tied over her midriff. Her lips are very red with an outline that goes beyond her real lips. She draws lines around her eyes and combs her hair. She helps me put on my bathing suit and takes my hand. We walk down to the ocean, following the sound.

You go ahead, she says when we reach the steps that go down to the sand. Mommy has something to do and will be right back. I go down with my pail and sit in the sand. She is up on the railing watching. She moves her hands in a swimming motion. My father has been taking me out into the water on his arms to get the feel of swimming. I move closer to the water and squat again, shoveling. I notice the foam made of bubbles around my toes. Then the wave comes and there is that brief moment when I glance up at her before I go under, but her red blouse and white shorts flash as she runs away.

Rollande Merz

FAMILY PORTRAITS

lie around for years. Their subjects
will sometimes trade places, wander
from picture to picture
each looking for a vacancy,
a family that fits him
like a handmade coat.

The sun overhead grants no shadow,
last week it rained like hell. Pictures
and families age in the weather, then
brittle and faded, they set, as a dye sets,
endlessly curving into themselves.

Rollande Merz

NOTE FROM A SINGLE PARENT

and it comes to this: my arms hurt.
I grip the steering wheel as if it were
my life, because it is. No maps or
signs, just unfamiliar roads, this
damned old car, small passengers, and
me, afraid. I drive with one foot on the
brake, to keep us from crashing
through guard rails, and rolling like
bottles and crumpled fast food bags down
muddy embankments. I sometimes ask
directions of policemen. They're suspicious
because I look like a litterbug
to them. Highway crews plant shrubbery
to beautify the roadside.

Phyllis Moore

TO MY ILLICIT FATHER

You call me
on Friday evenings
when your wife is out
for the groceries.
We talk of waterbeds
and wars,
your sister's death
and my mother's young beauty.

You tell me
I am your only embroidered daughter,
that you cannot catch
my thread ends
in your hands.

So you treat me like a lover:
offer your finest quills,
your best mattress,
the lion smell of your bathrobe.

I am almost enamored.
You shed words
as easily
as my mother
sheds tears.

"Listen," you tell me.
"I was there,
under the streetlamp;
it was raining;
the diamond was in my pocket."

Phyllis Moore

AFRAID OF THE DARK

(for CSB on the death of our grandmother)

I.

At home when we were children
dusk came too early
for those who bravely sinned
when it was light.
Bed without supper
no light in the hall
were punishment too great
for a nickel stolen
a quick look up Aunt Sally's dress
from under the table.
A call to Ma-Ma
and she'd devise some chore
that for the two of us was grace:
grain for the chickens
milk to the cats.
Then she'd light the lamps
and tell a story so familiar
we'd recite if her eyes rested
too long for our childish fears.
And there in our little circle of light
we, the newly redeemed, shivered
to even think
what was out there in the dark,
what lay in wait to get us
if she dozed
while we were still awake.

Phyllis Moore/Afraid of the Dark

II.

Today, half way across the world,
it seems, from those days,
you hold me
and memory flashes like
the yellow lamps against
the black of those nights.
What have we learned in all these years?
What can we tell each other?
That in winter the swallows disappear
to the dark side of the moon;
that for you Satan comes in a bottle,
for me the pen;
that though we love a hundred times
no love can save us;
that even here beside this little mound
of August dirt we're still afraid?
Not one key she gave us
ever opened midnight,
not one prayer evened any score,
and here, thirty years past childhood,
we still add up our sins,
and hell is the dark that creeps in
under the door.

George E. Murphy, Jr.

MEMORY

Faltering, late into the night, there is a song
I am struggling to recall. Or perhaps I'm composing,
shaping melody from impulse and recollection,
as if memory were only nerves, the haphazard
surge we sometimes label metaphor,
aligning and realigning with each wrong gesture
on the keyboard, each riff blunted by an abandonment
not of knowledge, nor desire, but of will.
This is a love of some sort
which refuses itself again and again, unready
to bear responsibility.

How is it we can live with such insistent
shapelessness?

In any room she enters, my mother, at the edge
of a great acceptable darkness to her left,
is happy in her new wheelchair, her left arm
dangling, forgotten, from it--whole years relieved
from the burden of memory; how pure and ill-timed
her laughter at everything we say, the songs
she hums when we leave the room.

Joan Rohr Myers

RECKONING

Tonight we are hauled home
by the walk of dead mothers
returning like thoughts.
Mist thin bodies of dust
they circle the moon looking
for children who have slipped
like the rain from their hands.
We cross ourselves in the dark
waiting for them to pass, like
moonlight bleached in their pain
they still hold stones
and take aim.

Liza Nelson

VACATION CALENDAR

Spread across a makeshift table
rasberries in a yellow bowl, fried pollack
bones picked through the night before,
long fingers strumming. So this is Maine

you accuse. I defend the shanty bungalow,
the sullen beach, mosquitoes
peeling an edge of brown sky.

Anything for some minutes alone
knee deep in weeds and pine spittle,
my breath sweet-sour with unwashed berries.

By low tide the sun burns through.
The rock festooned with lichen rises
from the waves. I lug out fat child

along a ripple ridge of mud and shells
to find a starfish, my souvenir.
I'll count our days together
by its broken points.

John Repp

three

He is three

and strawberry ice cream is New Year's Eve.

Edward Lewis Wallant, The Tenants of Moonbloom

morning is steam

from a white enamel teapot

buckwheat flapjacks & woodsmoke

afternoons we fly

down the big hill near Fifth Street

& fall in deep snow

making angels

& evening is a Victrola

polka with cousin Lynn

my hands clutching her warm

blue corduroy

CarolAnn Russell

DAMAGES

*Of two sisters
one is always the watcher,
one the dancer.*

Louise Gluck

How often I have watched you dance
whirling tatters of lace
into a rhythm I ache to follow,
slipping like a troubled thought
from my chair in the balcony
as if I'd won a prize
and my name were called
across the velvet dark.

In the first hour
my feet are like stones.
Shadows lock arms,
askew against the blind's
crippled slats.

When we were girls together,
the rose lamps of our breasts
swayed in the night of a tiny room.
Tonight we cannot control the dark
skirt that swirls
around our legs. More than sisters,
we are salt, coarse
jewels on the tongue
of the epileptic
the moment she is changed.

CarolAnn Russell

MY MOTHER IS A DIFFICULT RIVER

To fill a Gap

Insert the Thing that caused it--

Emily Dickinson

turns deep when least expected
becoming what she fears
she cannot swim.
When I am old will I be like her,
satisfied with birds
the way sun comes and goes?

Hot Augusts in Dakota father swam
brown water. I heard him, talking
in his sleep--river sounds,
praying he would find
a way with current he could stand.

Mother flowed with another power,
wild girl flowering
at the water's edge. When summer boils
hidden parts of the body
she is the tree I dive from.

I have been instructed on the danger
of rivers, strict water
and the secret, slippered fish
flowing what I barely remember--
heel and toe among the rocks.
One body dancing--
difficult river of my flesh.

Penelope Scambly Schott

MOVING AMONG SNOW WOMEN

She is so light she
does not break the smooth
skin of the snow. You
could almost mistake
her for juniper
by the porch steps, she
lifts over such drifts
and treads so lightly
across your front porch.

Nobody hears her
but you, and you hear
her moving in your
house. Oh, she is not
loud in the warm blood
of radiators,
settling bones of old
boards. Not those noises.

No, I mean the dead
woman still palming
her white breadboard, soft
scuffs up the dark stair.

There, at the sharp turn
of the landing, you
can catch her, that shy
bride fingering her
veil. Her damp hand stains
the rosewood newel
post, balances one
moment, and lets go.

Penelope Schott/Moving Among Snow Women

Follow her down your
turning stairs. Notice
how the light yellows
your parlor how each
February this
same astonishing
light hunts in corners.

And you are bound up
in a long lace web.
The pattern of low
sun through these curtains
is a message your
own daughter will read
years and years from now
in another house.

Carole Stone

THE DANCE

You were the cousin
who taught me to tango,
gliding across your kitchen floor,
all motion and light as you dipped.

I was shadow,
drifting in and out of that house
where your mother, the beautician,
dressed you in cashmere.

August nights, jangling charms,
you waltzed with sailors.
I read their letters under the covers
by flashlight, and saved the stamps
from Hong Kong, from India.
What was it like to be loved?

At your wedding
we whirled around the dance floor
one last time,
and I understood the singing
in your body could be mine.

Years later your husband pushes his knee
against me under the table.
How envy has a rhythm of its own.

Barbara Ungar

BREAKING GLASS

the green glass lamp shade cracked
I hate in me what breaks
through circled light and porcelain surface
Mom moved too fast, broke dishes, sliced fingers
we get her headaches, driven
in different directions toward the unbearable
crystalline sphere perfection
what we won't admit
cracks cups, makes bowls fly apart
in mid air, sends us to bed
clutching our four heads like hers
on the couch in the darkened livingroom
light years apart, siblings
like galaxies
recede at increasing speeds from our shat
tering origin

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