

THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

A University Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of
California State University, East Bay

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in English

By
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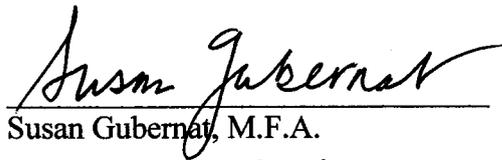
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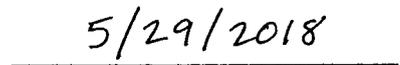
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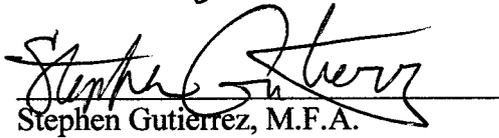
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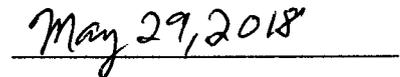
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Preface

*In the country of Westphalia, in the castle of the most noble
baron of Thunder-ten-tronckh, lived a youth whom nature
had endowed with a most sweet disposition. His face was
the true index of his mind.*¹

These are the opening lines of *Candide*, written by Voltaire, and translated for Barnes and Noble by Henry Morley. The book cost me about five dollars. The first time I read it I was twenty-three. Those were the days when I just hung around book stores and leafed through classics that school hadn't made me read yet. I had passed four aimless years in community college, my attention flicking off and on like a bare, basement lightbulb. I was about to start my BA in English at Cal State East Bay. About to figure out that I wanted to major in English. About to discover how much I loved poetry, how much I still hadn't read yet, and how much I wanted to write.

I read *Candide* on this precipice. Why did I love this book so much, and instantly? Because I was lonely, maybe, and book characters felt more accessible than people back then. Or because I fancied myself astute at that young age, like the profoundly sarcastic Voltaire. Of course, I admired the satire as a whole, the wild and distressing adventure, the waltz backward in time. But more than that, certain lines struck me and lodged forever in my brain. A simple phrase leveled an ideology, seeming effortless. A brief description etched itself into memory, inerasable. This is also what I love about poetry—the potency of a precise phrase, the order of words, the way a concise delivery can raise hairs. When I come across a perfect line, it never really leaves me. It will wrest my

attention at unexpected moments—*tension and surprise*²—like the sudden music from a passing car.

*His face was the true index of his mind.*¹ This line says, he was genuine. This line says, he wouldn't lie. This line also says, only a fool could be so candid. Candide was Voltaire's protagonist, but he was also the butt of most of his jokes. Back then, I understood this. Still, I identified with poor, tortured Candide. He trusted people. He told the truth. He tried to make others happy. He was a *youth whom nature had endowed with a most sweet disposition.*¹ That was me.

It wasn't cool. Honesty had made more kids hate me than like me. Sweetness had endeared me to a few teachers, but it wasn't a trait valued by many of my peers. My driving effort to please earned me the most attention all around, but it landed me time after time in the midst of tyrannical company. The most obvious example was my relationship with my mother. She was a failed musician and actress, desperate to be the emperor of something. I was pried out of her womb, a born subject. She was a narcissist and an addict, bipolar, delusional. I was the firstborn daughter, with no frame of reference.

My mom was the worst of all possible mothers, especially for a kid like me. I behaved. I followed orders. I listened. I agreed. I complimented her. I covered for her. I didn't make waves. I worked hard, especially to please her. But I also told the truth when she didn't want it. I pushed myself to be perfect, but I fell short. I eventually learned to lie to her, but the time it took didn't save me from the worst. And despite years of trying, I couldn't make her happy.

In many ways, she was my Pangloss—loud, unrealistic, hypocritical—assuring me that *all events are linked together in this best of all possible worlds*.¹ The implication being, of course, that she and I were made for each other.

A few weeks ago, my mother died. She left behind such a mess that I can't comprehend how to write about it yet. As a rule, I defy my natural inclinations toward superstition, but my mother's presence has seemed so substantial in the pageant of postmortem obligations that I can't help feeling haunted. It reminds me of what she often said: *I'll never let you go, not even when I die*. Right now, it's hard not to believe her.

I can add this recent life-altering event to my collection—all that has accumulated since I applied for the master's program at Cal State East Bay. I left my career teaching high school English. My grandmother died, just months before my beautiful son was born. My husband and I moved into his dead sister's house in Santa Cruz. My dad came out publicly as transgender. I returned to teaching as a GTA. And I spent the weeks following my mother's death interviewing at high schools all over the county until I finally signed a contract just days ago. There has been so much change, not only in my life, but in my country and in the world. Global warming. Plans for Mars. Surfaced outrage regarding myriad human rights violations. At the current juncture, as many people confuse lies with truth, misconceive credibility, and acquiesce to bias, I consider Voltaire. So much change, and yet so little. The thick-headed narcissist who acts as unstable president of this country contends that his is *the best of all possible worlds*.¹ In that, he echoes the scariest parts of my childhood.

Much of the poetry collected in this thesis is autobiographical, as are the two nonfiction pieces at the end. As compelled as I sometimes am to tell another's story, I know my own stories best. Does it matter? I think so, but as I have learned from my transgendered parent, categories divide, and classifications can limit. Thankfully, poetry is flexible. Poets are able to adopt personas, or to evade labels like fiction and nonfiction. I do relish the freedom to adjust content and to alter voice. That said, I would call most of what I have written candid.

There can be a lot of pain in writing this way. I continue to struggle with how to approach uncomfortable topics. One of the ways I have learned to handle emotional material is to package it using traditional poetic forms. It's like handling a hot dish with oven-mitts. I learned this technique from my mentor, Susan Gubernat, and I confess that the strategy elicits some of my best work. When used well, form is as integral to a poem as its voice or content. This collection contains several sonnets (including a sonnet crown), a sestina, a villanelle, a ghazal, a Sapphic stanza, and many poems in metered verse. Even when my meters are not strict, the rhythm of a line remains a dominant focus of my work. As Stephen Dobyns explains, poetry is *rhythmically sculptured sound*,² and Alexander Pope furthers, *the sound must seem an echo to the sense*.³ These are the tenets by which I compose my poetry.

The creative writer I have become during my years at Cal State East Bay is my answer to everything that I have lived. As Candide comes to realize at the end of Voltaire's tale, the world is unbearable unless one engages in productive work to channel one's suffering and anxiety. While Candide, the honest fool, *cultivates his garden*,¹ I

cultivate a written world to sustain me. It's not the best of all possible worlds. But I'll take what's honest over what's best.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	iv
Preface.....	v
Poetry	
The Best	1
Initiation	2
Coroner of the Yard	3
The Gates	4
Prometheus.....	6
Chapel of the Chimes.....	7
Weetamoo, Woman Leader of the Wampanoag	10
Manqué	12
Bee Sting and Lanikai Moonrise.....	13
Tea with the Countess Bathory	14
No Leading Need	16
Rural Driving: Lullaby and Exile, for M. Ward	17
Colorado.....	18
Ghazal to Youth	19
The Screenwriter’s Revision.....	20
Parlor Trick	21
The Fortress	22
No One Reading.....	23

Glowing.....	24
Dropping E.....	25
Parting.....	26
Elephant Grief.....	27
Elegy	28
That Said	29
Harry Nilsson, 1971	30
Red Flags	31
A Mother’s First Tattoo	32
Velocity.....	33
The Waltz.....	34
How I Dream of Grandma	35
Nonfiction	
Memorial Potluck.....	37
The Magic of Childhood.....	49
Endnotes.....	57

The Best

Thanks- many are saying I'm the best
140 character writer in the world.

– Donald Trump, *Twitter*

The truth is, I have heard this all before.
“So, what?” she'd say, ashing her cigarette,
the brittle flakes littering my report card
or crusting a My-Little-Pony's tail.

“I was the best writer in my class.” Or
the best singer, the best actress, the best
mother. Nothing a narcissist says is
unique, or true. She could brag to her friends

about her gifted daughters, then hang up
and scoop our toys into a garbage bag.
When the president tweets, I recognize
the simple turns of phrase: *very unfair*,

rigged system, believe me. The fabulist
is tireless when dressing lies as facts.
“You know, she's psychic,” one of my mother's
several men told me. For years, I behaved

as if it were true. Then she was Zelda
Fitzgerald in a past life. Also, an
alien abduction survivor. She
communed with the dead. She could hypnotize.

But she never got rich. She was never
famous. She brought no one back from the grave.
How many nights did she wake me, shaking?
“Tell me I'm pretty. Tell me I'm good.”

Initiation

Their blades are sharp as teeth. They eat children.
My mother said this about pampas grass,
to keep me far from rats, I imagine.
Her pretense thrilled—more gruesome than the facts.
So, in our narrow side-yard, forbidden,
I poked the spindly tussocks unafraid,
swinging on the gate, wielding my broken
fence picket, then found our cat, Spencer, dead.
Eyes wide, mouth wide, legs and paws stretched stiff, he
looked enraged. *Dead means peaceful. Like sleeping.*
My mother told me. That night, fidgety,
I kept my favorite doll's eyes from flicking
open, and mine, while the side-yard gate lurched,
unlatched, in the wind: *thud, screech-thud, screech-thud.*

coroner of the yard

my world at 12 was one & two
the family split
our insides from our outs: offspring
divided from parents, mother
& father chasmed a kingdom each
brooding member (& there were four)
disposed of its truth
in the dead cat plot; the corner
unweeded garden that crypt our
secret selves unearth

two of every one
two me, two she, two her, two him
one body for the burial
one body for display (*preserved*)

a corps of delicate corpses
charming to look at!
nothing inside, save small black ants
carefully, and worms

at school I wrote my first poem
& it was a bit too true
Ms. B kept me
& called my mom, who
glared and filed
her claws

at home that evening I noticed
out back

a broad gash
in the plot

The Gates

There is a scar on my hand
from when I was small. Sometimes I notice
the odors of that memory. They resurface.
Vodka on your breath. Flesh scorched under the weight
of the steam iron. A lesson seared into the impact.
The scar is old, but I don't outgrow its shape.

The scar-less memories assume a stranger shape.
They jitter like a beaten dog, out of hand,
upsetting scraps, nosing for a safe place to weather impact.
I haven't talked to you for years. Still, I notice
a low-frequency throb permeating every day. A weight
in the cavity of my chest. In the hollows of my face.

They say no image soothes like a mother's face,
but yours is a twisted shape
when I wring it from my childhood. The weight
of disappointment. Perspiration in my hand.
I was better off unnoticed,
avoiding impact.

When you were four years old (just before the impact),
your brother Douglas turned to face
the screams. He flung wide the door in time to notice
the twelve-foot iron gates fall, determined to reshape
your pigtailed head. He couldn't lift them with his two hands.
Your other brother, Bill, was also pinned beneath the weight.

You were crushed silent. The moment couldn't wait.
He ordered Bill to twist his hips—the point of impact,
enough leverage to slide you out, hand over hand.
Blood in your hair, across your face.
Alarm brought the distant shape
of an ambulance, and the community's notice.

You survived the accident, but they all noticed
a change. You became quick to anger and unable to wait.
You claim the shape
of your life was transformed by the impact.
You grew up bitter, insatiable, with an irresistible face.
You received the offers of several hands.

You married. Drank heavily, reeling from the impact.
You gave birth to me, then my sister, but how could you face
these children so hell-bent on mistakes? Only brutally. By hand.

Prometheus

Have some more, fire-giver.
Each cracked dawn recruits a liver
for the birds to rend, gum.
The bones will split when meat is gone.

Sharpest trickster ever tried—
what worth have wits, or hands, when tied?
Five useless fingers on each hand
one for each vile age of man.

And you, rebel, firebrand,
suffer blisters for that hand.
Does the price you pay for men
quench your altruistic yen?

Chapel of the Chimes

Protected by the glass which enables them to be seen, sheltered by this transparent and frozen parenthesis, life and death can communicate in order to remain one within the other, one in spite of the other, what they are indefinitely.

—Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth*⁴

I

In this strange labyrinth, how shall I turn?
 I've seen a spirit, restless and awake,
 flickering like glaze, mirrored in each urn,
 reflecting as she wanders by mistake
 into *Eternal Wisdom, Memory,*
Court of Living Waters, or in *Prayer.*
 In each garden of the silent Chimes she
 searches, and is lost. It's a fate we share.
 (I try not to remember.) Dead beauty,
 darling, ashes, and ghost. Stay secret, don't stray
 where I will find you. Find *Serenity!*
 In the silence of the chapel I delay,
 anticipating the echo of a breath,
 confounded by these passages through death.

II

These passages confound! Only through death
 (the turned, ritual part of the secret,
 that reveals one exists, that one is kept,
 without giving away), do we vacate
 the struggle of body, and soul, and mind.
 Life is borders and interned dissention.
 Daedalus suffers as we do, strives to find
 transcendence of body through invention,
 conceives of wings, but only flies to pain.
 His gifted child dashed to the fury
 of writhing, unknown swells. Never again
 will creation mean a thing. His only
 son vanished to a point beyond return,
 cloaked in the obscurity none can discern.

III

Cloaked in obscurities none can discern
 I touch my hand to the glass-paneled wall,
 proceeding to drag my fingers along
 name after name. Epitaphs thread the hall.
 Where is she now? Where is the child, the bride?
 To seek out a ghost I must disown sense.
 She will not unearth. She is in disguise.
 Therefore I cannot trust eyes, ears, or hands.
 What about my mind? I know its meaning
 no better than I understand the stars,
 or scenes carved into grape seeds, intoning
 the monochrome symphony of Klein. Pause.
 Minotaur hoof beats, direction bereft,
 the soul is dragged along. The way is left.

IV

The soul is dragged along the way. Is left
 a recourse through the memory? Yes—
 to walk, a hand on either wall is deft,
 but right is just as easy or complex.
 The trick is to settle upon one,
 this side or that, and not to vacillate.
 To ourselves, our own limits are unknown
 this is the reason why we hesitate
 (and why we stow ashes in golden rooms
 and why we make-believe the vampire
 and why we build sonnets in pretty tombs).
 Ambivalence, our sanctifier
 will stop us between breath and death to loom
 captive in crystal, an alter-womb.

V

Captive in crystal. An alter-womb
 encircles Roussel's dancer, Faustine.
 Fluid, yet fixed, her radiant plume
 of hair strikes *aqua micans*, tinkling.
 Both woman and instrument, she is song;
 something like my buried friend, the prodigy
 who had mastered Schubert, Chopin, Liszt—long
 before she yearned, or feigned sincerity.
 At her piano, she was always far away;

underwater, trapped by jewel-shaped glass.
 She died alone, suddenly and young. They
 wouldn't say overdose, incision, gas.
 From tiny prisons, the butterflies spring.
 Inurned, the dead girl's earth will crumb and cling.

VI

Inurned, the dead girl's earth will crumb and cling,
 but she is not this garden, these golden
 letters, this bolted plate. She is memory,
 melody, calliope; the chiming
 of this labyrinth-chapel—she is song!
 I have turned the corner, found her, but not here.
 This vessel is too small. To unite beyond
 any known or imaginable sphere
 a spectrum of sizes without relation,
 that is mystic (or the work of Roussel)
 and yet, all life is contradiction.
 I am solar-dust, I watch dust-flakes fall
 tinted red and yellow by stained glass panes.
 Each urn in this chapel cradles remains.

VII

Each urn in this chapel cradles remains,
 more names engraved than anyone can learn.
 When Daedalus erected walls, his fame
 evolved into a prison tower, torn
 toward the sky, the sun, toward God, and anything
 that would not be contained. Creation ends
 (in parenthesis) in sets of walls. String
 remembrance like purpose, like a thread,
 and follow faithfully—as musical
 refrains follow counterpoint, as floral lace
 hedges stiff and presumptuous bridal
 beds. Faustine drowns. The Minotaur awaits,
 indefinite. Then shall the dust return,
 and labyrinths (forever) I shall mourn.

Weetamoo, Woman Leader of the Wampanoag

Crossroads at Nichewaug, 1676

Our world is a body
of soil and water.

Our wetlands are ribbons
of second sky
pinned to the earth by pond lilies.

Our trails are the pulse, the course
of asylum. Veins
sheltered just within the
morass of skin.

Barricades of bulrush and conifer,
miles of mud.
Here, they cannot track us.

Smoke has not cleared
from our stubbed-out cornfields, but
cranberries rise like a welt
across the bog.

We can always eat ground bone.

We are women. Our backs bear
our children, our elders,
everything we own.

Our canoes destroyed,
we will yoke dead boughs
for able rafts.

Our rivers thin-iced,
we will cross surefooted
at the beaver's dam.

Like beavers, we shall return always,
to find refuge in this place.

Do not tell me
what befell the beavers.

Do not tell me
that I will die naked on the riverbank.

Do not tell me
they trapped us out of existence.

Manqué

Tuning pegs on a hushed guitar,
he takes a stool, and the gut strings
skew, whining out in this lapsed bar.

It's a middleman's music, far
from rare, begrimed, like the aging
tuning pegs on a hushed guitar.

I wait, mull cigarettes to char,
in a corner booth, cushion springs
askew, wearing out in this lapsed bar.

You show, sensual, Venus and noir,
slide in, and drop your wedding ring
(a powder keg amid hushed guitar)

into the ashtray. Gaze ajar,
your hands withdraw, and my sulking
renews, washing out in this lapsed bar.

“Just give us one more chance, for our—”
I beg, but hear the song's ending.
Turning heads over hushed guitar:
you, walking out of your last bar.

Bee Sting and Lanikai Moonrise

The phospholipase-color-stung daylight
has drained; uncorked to blackness, indigos,
deep, uncertain greens. *Tender is the Night*
between anaphylactic throbs. Who knows,
anything could rise out of this ocean,
schooner, surfer, adulterous doctor?
And Fitzgerald's book remains propped open
in the sand where I foraged for lovers
all afternoon and tempted none. No one
vacations in Hawaii by themselves;
pollination is purposefully done.
By day they tread the sand, two moonlike halves
of one droned liaison, and I alone
waggle-dance, deserted beneath this moon.

Tea with the Countess Bathory

We drank it in her garden. Each long sip
 deepened her wide smile. Then I let slip
 a word or two of longing for ideal
 yet dangerous men, betraying sanguine zeal.

She pressed her drained teacup to its saucer,
 rose up like an arched brow, beckoned me closer.
 Once inside her castle she led me here,
 her voice a sleek appendage crooked in my ear:

“Do you, fresh budding woman, believe in
 legends? The tantalizing shimmer in
 twilights and broken dawns? A dance with death,
 buried in a marriage plot? The breath-

less, coital pitch? The world’s familiar
 boy-takes-girl, under the red lamp? I’m sure
 then, that you are my intended listener.
 Lock fingers with me, poor blameless sister,

I will guide you down. We tell a story
 to light the darkness no one completely
 understands. There is no bright truth, merely
 a flicker, then the moral greys away.

It is like this tunneling well of stairs.
 Our candle lights the stones and iron bars,
 but ends around each corner are obscured—
 and in this way all women are immured.

There is hunger beyond carnal pleasure,
 and it is not exactly a game. Your
 blunt youth and beauty are not sentinels
 or accoutrements, just fragrant death knells.”

The countess paused to sniff the iron air,
 her sudden hand entangled in my hair
 with the precision of a courtesan’s glove
 or the caracal’s paw upon the dove.

She drew me through the hall into a cell.
 As something heavy throttled shut, the smell

closed in like a tetanus jaw. Slaughter
house fumes. Tools for a butcher.

Pinning me close, teeth clipping each vowel,
her final words pricking at my cheek, “Well,
imprudent girl, this room is the last room.
This legend is true. And this is your tomb.

Formidable predators can never be
moralized, or reformed by affinity.
A wolf—is a wolf—and inhuman. The
rest don red hoods that only wolves can see.

And that’s just men, because of course, there’s me.”

No Leading Need

Bring me but to the very brim of it...
From that place I shall no leading need.

— Gloucester, *King Lear* 4.1⁵

Poor Tom knew me as an old blind lecher,
the end. This is my last moveable feast.
His hand in mine, we inverted the world
like an enormous sleeve, across five acts.

Wild black hole. Nothing left but little bits.
“Father, do look up; we make of the drop
what we wish, seeing better,” he pleaded.
“We are nothing, come from nothing, just like

Ants!” Small words. I gave him my hand. I am
for Dover, one who sired paradox—
we all bear the children we deserve—and
the worst not yet being over (never).

Bring your blanket, Tom. Repair misery.
A picnic is a great place for a cliff.

Rural Driving: *Lullaby & Exile*, for M. Ward

Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you

—John Ashbery, *At North Farm*⁶

Oh, a trance! Engine thrums. Driving ahead
of everything is a spell you forget
on a blank road, with a thrill; wrapped up in
riding the inside line, as row after
row of farmers' graft dodges past. Now it
must be getting late and try as you might
to fight it, the sky dulls in most places.
But not the left corner of your eye, yet.
(Love will get you to drive north in the end.)

Then the band, heave-twanging, as an old barn
rots in rearview, starts the ball—waltzed through car
stereo as the chandelier-sun-vault
starts glowing tangerine and Cheshire green
and (with or without you knowing) sudden
striking red. Still, you're asking the question
that lolls on every paltry whitewashed fence:
who? who the partner? And the early stars
that shuffle into aspect on the new
night's half-lit wall snicker: *why? what the dance?*

Colorado

Because we could, we made love in the dunes.
The trip had been a waste, we knew. And yet,
sex was sex. Why else hike so far into
that boneyard, skin stippled by sand and sweat.
Your lips stung, saltier than I remembered,
as we stripped. I was tired of you, tired of
struggling uphill. But I gasped and trembled
and gripped—lofted by warmth, hips thrust up.
What I loved was the caress of shadowed sand
on my bare feet, and how the landscape rose
and fell like groping nudes. Your sturdy hands
pressed hard into my flesh. On my elbows,
struck by the beauty of the crests, I thought:
how far more satisfying—if we were caught.

Ghazal to Youth

I stormed out of a fight with my crazy
mother. Got in the car and drove away.

I drove all night, delirious, no sleep,
but the steering wheel never slipped away.

I loved that shitty bar perched on the beach
like a stone gull that couldn't fly away.

I liked that it always opened early—
a bloodshot eye that rarely looked away.

I met a friend, a man too fond of me,
who wanted what I wouldn't give away.

I let him fetch my drinks and subtly
thumb my waistline as he walked away.

I stripped to undergarments on the beach.
The booze had flushed all modesty away.

I outran that fawning man, or possibly
I looked my best from far enough away.

I was alone, turning sloppy cartwheels
in the sand, comedown just an hourglass away.

I lost my favorite sweater in the sea.
In morning sun, I watched it drift away.

I gave up searching and impulsivity
forever. Katrina, wipe that smirk away.

The Screenwriter's Revision

The noncommittal colors
of early day bleed backdrops.
I am looking for you. The gray casquette,
the corner of your mouth, your jaw.

I arrive in a swirl of cloud. The car
trails away. Someone
asks, *Are we making a movie?*
A woman, hip deep in yellow grass
is the rumored leading lady.
You knew her in Europe, probably Swiss,
a warbling viola.

Crossing me, some boy with a dolly:
*I know the lines. Let me play the girl,
at least I speak English—*

The topless Swiss girl unnerves me, swaying.

You're not quite in the distance
when I catch you
pacing, flapping your arms.
You ruffle the pages, your voice cracking:
The problem is this script!

I wonder aloud what's wrong with it.
You declare that there's no crisis.
What about bees? You inform me
that bees are not scary. I disagree. *Some
are as big as your kidney!*
Their venom is deadly!
But you don't know what I mean.

At about this time the sky darkens.

I am putting on my raincoat. I slick
myself with mud. I warned you,
About the bees, sweetheart.
Leaving, I tap the Swiss girl's shoulder:

Put some clothes on, Viola.
The bees have come to be in your movie.

Parlor Trick

“He wore me down,” she says
 about her husband. (He’s a geek
 turned techie, easily
 the wealthiest
 of all my high school friends.)
 The envious wives
 devouring tapas and wine
 pause to chuckle in that
 well-appointed home.

He wore her down, I consider
 and consult the Dali, the
 Diebenkorn. She’s an artist
 with good taste, at leisure now
 to paint, to draw, to
 collect. We all know.

I knew him before she did.
 Remember the crates
 of Magic cards? The pewter
 dragon figurines? Up all night
 coding, crushing cans of Coke,
 designing his own games?
 The genius.

Remember his signature move?
 At parties he’d slip
 crushed ice
 into a girl’s mouth
 with a wide kiss.
 “Brought you some ice,” he’d grin.

Stupid. Harmless. I’d say it then.
 He meant no harm. I’d say it now.
 And yet, I’m remembering
 not one of us
 had ever
 asked for ice.

The Fortress

Each morning there they are, waiting to be shoved into a bin and hauled away, or maybe not. They might sit all day. A barrier to wall you in with your computer, your video games, your porn. A virtual paradise. Why can't a chickenshit, full of gas and Coors, enjoy the empire he's made with his quick fingers—all night long—played so skillfully with and for himself? Why am I crushed by the sentinel line and shine of so many aluminum cans? Must be how they stand around when you're just sleeping off joy, through the noise of our small boy snatching dead soldiers from your wall.

No One Reading

Let's sail to the island of poets.
I'm bringing you too. And I know
you don't want to come.
I'm sick of writing for no one.

There. A place where everything silent
writhes in incessant thrum.
It's like we're marooned, but better—
safer, sounder, letter by letter.

Hear slick banana leaves dive in stiff breezes,
geodes explode into steel drums. And you
squirm, bound to some creaky wreckage—
sodden mast or abandoned mermaid.

And I will hold your head down,
your ear open, and douse you
in poetry. You complain it's too salty,
so what? Sea foam! Silt! Kelp! Brine!

Castaway or captive
audience. Either way, you are mine.
Because I caught you. I brought you.
The island rumbles, all conchs aroar!

And that is the smell of sea death—
you run wild, treading the surf.
No one reads poetry, you barbaric idiot.
Your hot signal fire—ridiculous.

Glowing

My favorite color is pink, I said,
knowing this meant admission to the club,
the all-frills-ponyland of little girls,
and I was three-year-old initiate.

My favorite color is yellow, she said,
and the shock snapped my crayon in half.

I like yellow, she said. *It's bright, like
sunshine, and it gets my brain working.*

But all the girls I knew liked pink.

That's okay for them. But I like yellow.

And her yellow dragonflies and monkeys
became studies in neuropsychology,
a graduate degree, a life's work, and
all the colors in that damn box of crayons.

Dropping E

Dropping E, they used to say.
Rolling, once the high closed in.

Friday nights I slicked my hair,
 bright with neon dye, and tied
 left side, right side, into buns.
 Just like Chun-Li. Badass cute.

Flared does not describe the pants—
 silhouettes like angels' robes.
 Triangles. Cartoonlike widths,
 fifty inches at each hem.

Nothing but a slinky cloth
 yoked here, pinned there, draping each
 breast. And glitter. How I shined,
 pining. *Let me dazzle them.*

Parties. Always on display,
 teenage girls (myself among)
 danced across each strobe-lit floor,
rolling, tossed by BPMs,
 (safe from ordinary lives,
 old age, debt, inconsequence)
 glowing, vernal, falling stars,
 envied, craved, etcetera.

Once, my dealer fucked me up.
 Potent pills. Some crazy shit.
 Big guy. Thrust me down against
 rough sheets. Wouldn't let me go.
 Lips beside my ear, he hissed
you're so hot, and did his thing.
 After, he was generous.
 Offered all the ecstasy
 I could handle, free of charge.
 Glitter must have left its mess,
 marked the pillows and his hands.
 Pulling up my clownish pants,
 fixing my mussed hair, how fast
 dancefloors filled up with regret.

Parting

The ocean is swallowing everything
as we watch our best friend hop the train.
We will never get him back—just in
fragments. A pinch in the ribs each Christmas,
or salting coffee by mistake. Instead, we
listen to the sea howl, a cat
that only wants back in. The setting sun
looks tacked to a wall. We stare
into the ocean's maw and can't remember
a time before we were sisters,
or before we loved that absent friend.
A single jacket stretched across our backs
blocks the wind, while our hairs tangle
in the golden light. The ocean
hammers beach as boxcars
pummel rails. Leaning into each other,
hunched over the sand, I can't tell anymore
which is my hand, your hand.

Elephant Grief

All these years, I never assumed I'd weather
Margie's death when someday it came to claim her.
Not the way the elephants mourn their dead, so
orderly, calm—the

ring of grieving elephants kissing bones from
quiet, leaden remains. But once, a mother
seized her stillborn calf—like a vise, her trunk and
ivory halberd

crumpled small the delicate infant's torso.
Firm, she thrust the calf toward disinterested
clouds, took steps in wayward directions, stopped. Then
bitterly dropped him.

Sometimes there is nothing to be done. Waiting
shovels gnawed bones into the bowels, while the
ending's rarely justified. Slow hours at the
hospital. Death, on

time, arrives. Infinities dry her open
eyes. I kiss that tenantless face and step out
into empty night, where I can't find my
car, or a foothold.

Elegy

This morning on the roof there are two of us
to mourn you. There is me,
and there is your unborn great grandson
who must feel this because he shares my body.

You died in the night, in the dark, a few hours ago
but now the sky floods with daylight anyway, bewildering,
like music at the bottom of a swimming pool, or
a heavy rain of flower petals.

The moon, slight as a tendril of your downy hair,
and waned to a last look, slips slowly and silently
away from Venus. The impossibly wide morning clouds
turn pink, then gold, then split apart.

Someone is frying bacon, and I remember the day
you woke me, fed me breakfast, and drove me
to the hospital where I met my baby sister for the first time.
This day, and every day from here, will be born.

My son, in a few months, will be born. Emphatically,
this is affirmed by the flushed eruption of morning sun.
The part that sticks somewhere, like a dislodged shard
of clavicle, is that it all goes on without you—

That it can.
That this day and so many others
will deliver sunlight, even staggering love,
and that I will miss you for the rest of my life.

That Said

Early this morning I discover the cat
huddled beneath our son's plastic slide. Still
breathing, his right eye
sealed shut in a mottle of blood.

Missing for a week, how many mornings has he
waited here to be recovered, but run
for deeper cover with the rise
of daylight's bright cacophony?

Ten years together, he trusts me
to handle him. I find wounds on his neck, legs.
Blood caked in his filthy fur. He shifts
his weight like giving in,

and looks at me like maybe this is it.
I call the vet, and as I sit with him
remember other cats killed
by pneumonia or cars,

how when I was young each loss roiled
inside me. Broken, hysterical sobs.
Departures met with equal parts
tantrum and agony.

I stroke an unmarred place along his chest,
talking to him slowly, voice low.
"It's all right," we often say, not really
meaning "you're going to get better."

Like some quiet room
where a nurse says, "It won't be long."
The listener's eyes don't even look away
shoulders set, still as dawn.

Harry Nilsson, 1971

after Rick Barot's "Whitman, 1841"⁷

I don't know if she did or did not kiss the man.
But she told me she met Nilsson through a friend,
who met him playing guitar for McCartney's *Ram*

or for Lennon's *Imagine*, which already sounds
wrong, because her friend didn't play guitar on *Imagine*
at all. That's my mother for you, secrets and bullshit.

Some secret! But she never breathes a word until
I am thirty years old, mopping up the diarrhea
on the seat of her recliner, and she is dancing

in drunken corkscrews across the living room rug.
She's been watching the Nilsson documentary
on repeat for weeks. From the chair I'm cleaning,

she wanders him into being with her remote control.
Not finding him in her first life, she finds him
in another and drags him into the room with us.

"My soulmate," she says. "He thought I was beautiful.
And talented. I could sing. He said so. He was a genius."
Her floral blouse flares as she spins. It's inside out.

And the documentary talks about those restless years
when there was no real place for him, until the trail
of photos, articles, stories and lawsuits started

up and showed he was a Hollywood Vampire,
sucking down booze and getting Beatles into trouble.
She totters, thumping her baby grand piano.

Then she backs into its curve like she's twenty-one
and describes the party, its night sky and clouds of pot,
her friend, Hugh, strumming his guitar, her meeting

Harry on the patio, and how they danced, and kissed.
Then she sings *The Moonbeam Song*, just like when I was little.
When she was at her meanest. When she was sober.

Red Flags

“I love you,” he said, feeling marched toward it
because he hadn’t been the one she phoned
at the threshold of her—what? Not death,
because the pills had mostly come up. Had they
bobbed like curds or clustered sea monkeys
in the toilet bowl—separating, half-
digested, violently purged? Had she
meant to tell him why, to hint at—something?
In the blunt light of the visitor’s lounge
her eyes frisked other faces in the room
like he’d just left the table. He had
missed the signals—red banners snapping
as she slid in and out of his bed, like he paid her,
her smile crisp and white as a folded note.

A Mother's First Tattoo

Squeamish about blood and pain, I have none.
They preclude changes, unlike nail polish
or hairstyles. Until today, what one
thing in my life deserved a monolith?
But here, driving toward the hospital, I
crave an immutable brand. My body
bristles: I will not lose you. Mummify
a fixed emblem in my flesh, already
sun damaged. Let skin wrinkle, sag, and thin
around the vow. Even if they're ugly,
let bodies end where stains begin.
I wouldn't mind now. Fuck mortality
and loss; our sutured lives leave an inked scar.
Time and nature chip. Love burrows under.

Velocity

Lucky to have met when we were kids, bad
because we liked our games, our risks, we made good,
booby trapped the road with railroad spikes,
tore up Grizzly Peak, drove the Skyline Lights
with your Camaro's headlamps off, the edge
defined by small white bulbs, the ledge
winding like our hands under our clothes, urbane
ignis fatuus on the cliff—*if two trains
leave each station, which*—we, the type who ditched
physics class (distance equals speed enriched
by time), delighted, fifteen years or more
along, while toy cars zip across the floor,
lean in together as our whirring child plays.
Lucky, I suppose, that's how lucky is.

The Waltz

Morning is slinking, just waking the small birds.
Early, in dim light, she drifts toward the workbench,
hot tea in one hand, worn silks in a basket.

Choosing a soft pink, she's threading the needle,
coaxing machine parts, then chattering blithely,
secretly sewing, she taps out the rhythm.

Lavender perfume still clings to the garments.
Smiling, she pieces the delicate patchwork,
spot-cleans mascara, embroiders a new bead.

Years now she's tailored, repaired, for her father,
camisoles, negligees, butterfly caftans—
exquisite raiment so unlike what she wears.

Dressing in high heels, he'll foxtrot the hallway,
fry eggs in the kitchen; spatula, satin,
buttery yellow in second-floor sunshine.

Russet and auburn, his long wig, in soft curls
gleams like a new day. He changes the record—
glam rock: Roxy Music, T. Rex, Ziggy Stardust.

Single, it's his choice—the trappings, the rock songs.
Married, he kept it all locked in a cabinet
darkened by toolshed seclusion, like scandal.

Tying the loose ends, she thinks of him, free now.
Strut lawless and rash! Split seams in each armpit!
Someday the two might walk out of the shadows,

gold pumps clicking sidewalk in his skinny jeans,
sheer chiffon blouse, and a mauve lipstick pout (his
panic diminished to a prudent pink blush)

simply out with a daughter all afternoon;
jubilant, buying basil, smelling citrus,
savoring chocolate at some bright market stall.

How I Dream of Grandma

I

This time
we only adjust the curtains.
Look how easy it is,
you say, pulling a cord.
Letting light in,
letting light out.

II

This time
we're in the old apartment
because I don't have the old apartment
because you left it years ago.
You're in the old chair
because it must be evening
and I sob into your knee
because I've had it out there.
You shush, and stroke my hair,
and this is the only place I could find you
because

III

This time
we take in the sea
I am so happy we made it
I say, turning to you,
and ah—
we are same age
not yet twenty?
A pair in button down
house dresses,
our ditsy florals rippled
by the breeze.
Our hair rippled
in perfect finger waves
just the way you showed me.

Arms linked,
we stroll the Boardwalk
which hardly looks the same—
untouched—yes, the way
your eyes look, and—
You know what I want?
A hot dog! you say.

We pay the vendor
at the little blue cart
and your first bite makes me laugh.
I watch you sink real teeth in
all *mm—mmm*, and eyelash flutter.
Then I say,
We should have done this
every day
before you died,

and the Boardwalk dissolves
and you're holding my chin,
your arm reaching out
from the hospital bed.

Memorial Potluck

Marjorie Gladys Hedenland Knutsen died on the tenth of September 2015, just shy of her one-hundred-and-first birthday. Three months prior, she was bedridden in a nursing home, but in the highest spirits I had seen in years. It was Saturday afternoon, so I snuggled an uncomfortable plastic chair up to the head of her bed, sat down, and woke her softly, like always.

“Grandma.”

Her narrow neck twitched. Each week, I imagined I could recognize her shrinking. I was used to her fat. A full-figured, buxom Swede, my grandmother had only been skinny once in her life. When my mother was about thirteen, and certainly up to no good, a doctor prescribed my grandmother an amphetamine-based antidepressant. In those old photographs Marjorie resembled the spindle of mercury in a thermometer, with a mercurial countenance to match. The worst was a silver photo where she glowered, eyes darkened by vehement circles, over my mother’s birthday cake. As a child, the photo frightened me. That was not my Marjorie.

“Grandma,” I sing-songed again.

It was summer, so the blankets were cast off. She wore the same polyester pants and faded floral blouse that I had seen a thousand times, literally, because she hadn’t bought new clothes in twenty years. Thin white hairs stuck to the pillow in wispy tendrils and impish mats. Deep sleep accentuated her smooth, blushing skin. Hardly a wrinkle. Miraculous. Her roommate, even the nurses, complained out of girlish jealousy. She was

so terribly old, but her skin was tricky, suggesting a perpetual freshness easily confused with everlasting life.

She stirred, blinked her grey eyes open. “Who is it?”

“It’s Katrina.”

A smile. “Katrina!” Of course it was.

She rearranged her stiff limbs with some difficulty as I adjusted the hospital bed. Her eyes were wide now, and starry, like a child’s. She reached over to touch my pregnant belly and asked, “Did you see the doctor yesterday? How is the baby?”

“The doctor says *he* looks perfect.”

“It’s a boy!” She squealed, pressing her arthritic hands together.

“Yes. We are going to call him Charlie.”

She hummed the name to herself, “Charlie, Charlie, Charlie,” and gazed affectionately at my tangible bump. We spent the rest of the afternoon discussing the family’s good news. That summer, each of my cousins had hit some kind of stride. There was a wedding, a college graduation, several career promotions. One cousin fronted a cover band that developed a wild cult following. Even my life was something to talk about; I was enrolled in grad school, happily married, with my first child on the way.

Grandma took my hand and squeezed. “I couldn’t be more proud.” We both knew how much had been overcome. My mother, Karen, was an abusive addict who I spent my childhood trying to rescue. My grandmother blamed herself for my mother’s malignity and narcissism, so she tried to intervene. Despite both of our efforts, Karen ruined everything she could get her hands on, including my self-esteem and Marjorie’s credit

score. I finally escaped, blocked my mom's number, moved to an undisclosed address, built a life. Marjorie kept my secrets. Only then, while beaming, did Grandma's wrinkles show.

"You are all smiles today," I observed.

She looked out the window at a grim and flowerless grey patio, but saw something else. "Just look around us. The grass is so green everywhere. Whatever we want, let's go for it!" Outside the nursing home every California lawn was beige with drought, but I wasn't about to spoil her metaphor. She glanced back at me, her eyes nearly mischievous. Infectious enthusiasm lit up the pink paint on the cinderblock walls. I fought the sudden urge to break her out of there, to pop her out of bed and into a wheelchair, to fly down the hall and out the door. In my fantasy, her red 1930 Whippet would be waiting in the parking lot. She would drive the way she used to as a girl, recklessly. We could go anywhere she wanted. For one instant, I believed.

In the months that followed Marjorie's grass-green day, she declined by increments. Eventually I was visiting every evening, not just Saturday afternoons, because she stopped eating and refused intravenous supplements. Hospice nurses, elusive as ancestral spirits, were supposedly managing her pain. When she begged for water, I was allowed to feed her ice chips from a Dixie cup with a sample-sized plastic spoon. Sometimes she would sleep through my visits. Sometimes she couldn't see or hear me and lay moaning with her eyes open. Other times she would wake up to meet my eyes and hold a conversation that felt more like a snakebite.

Sometime in August, as days grew noticeably shorter, I huddled bedside. Marjorie's perfect skin had thinned, just masking her bones, like white linen draped throughout an abandoned house. She survived far longer than the doctors or the hospice nurses predicted, stretching herself across months of pendulum swings. Days when she couldn't talk and could only cry out in pain, I longed for her swift death. Days when she was able to form thoughts and words, I fumbled desperately for something to say, something to bring her back to me. On such a day, I tried to rejuvenate her with talk about the baby.

"Charlie's due date is Thanksgiving. He might be born a few days late, on your birthday. Wouldn't that be something?"

"Oh no, no, no," she whined.

I instantly regretted saying it. Honestly, I shared her apprehension. The twenty-ninth of November was a complicated day in our family. Years ago, trapped with an abusive husband, Marjorie sought escape from a perilous cycle. My grandfather, Albert, drank, cheated, and beat his wife. Each time she threatened to leave him, he had her committed to a mental institution. She would return, mollified by shock treatments, her memory erased. On the verge of thirty-six, she was carrying a child for the fourth time, one she couldn't remember conceiving. Dark memories resurfaced. With her birthday fast approaching, cautioning a lifetime of torment, Marjorie attempted suicide. She drank iodine. My mother was born, premature, on my grandmother's birthday. They shared that day always, survivors knit together by an act of violent desperation, less mother and daughter than psychologically conjoined twins.

“Maybe he will be born even later than that, in December,” I offered, an attempt to correct my mistake, to cheer her. “You will be one-hundred-and-one by then!”

“I won’t be here, you know,” she muttered.

“What do you mean, Grandma?”

“I won’t be here for you, for him,” she pointed feebly toward my belly, “for Charlie.”

The unsolicited truth.

But we need you, I wanted to say.

And said nothing, respecting what seemed to be a decision she had made. I wanted to curl up beside her in the hospital bed, like a three-year-old. Instead, I took her hand, pulsing with my own: *Please. Don’t. Leave.*

There was no formal funeral service. On October eleventh, a month after her death, the family met at Uncle Ron’s house to share food, and memories. Marjorie would have approved. I brought a cake, her recipe, vinegary dark chocolate ribboned with cream cheese filling and frosted with ganache. I also brought a book for people to write in, to record stories about her. The book was a cousin’s idea, but I ended up making it, and keeping it. Even now I am Marjorie’s annalist.

Seized upon at the door, I was the chum to their sharks. The family rained out compliments: *oh how slender, beautiful, glowing!* And expressions of gratitude: *oh how difficult, with her every day, there until the end.* They pressed in with well-meant kisses, arms, and hands. Instantly, I required space. My husband and I hurried past Marjorie’s

ashes on the fireplace hearth and the coffee table littered with photographs, into the empty dining room. There, I claimed a seat that faced the wall. The tears would come. At the other end of the house, my mother kept her distance. I knew that she could scent my arrival, like blood in the tide.

“I’ll never let you go!” my mother used to shout, grab us, and constrict. The phrase was supposed to be playful—joke dialogue borrowed from a poorly translated Russian animated film that my sister was so obsessed with she wore out the tape. No matter how much my mother laughed, the words struck me as sinister. Karen would chase us around the house playing “Mommy Monster,” which was an excuse to howl and gnash her teeth, to hiss that we weren’t daughters at all, just disgusting little pigs. Eventually she would catch us and growl that whatever nasty thing we had coming, we deserved it. Later she would chuckle as we wiped our eyes. “It’s only a game,” she would say.

In *The Runaway Bunny*, the only children’s book she ever seemed to read to us, a young rabbit imagines several creative ways to leave home. He turns into a fish, a rock, a flower, but the mother rabbit refuses to let him go, becoming a fisherman, a mountain climber, a gardener. Eventually, the bunny gives up, conceding no escape. The message was foreboding. Children were something to be contained, possessed. The ending nibbled away at my stomach, a little more each time she read.

At eighteen, I packed my clothes, determined to move in with a boyfriend. Karen charged into the room with the speed and ferocity of ten thousand mother rabbits. She turned over furniture, hurled me into the closet, and released flurries of t-shirts from

inverted garbage bags. In moments, her hands were around my throat, clawing and clenching at the same time. Her face turned the color of radishes. Her mascara rippled outward in rings, like wet clown makeup. “You don’t walk away from me,” she frothed, “not after all I’ve done.”

She was right. Although I disentangled myself that day and left, three years later I was back. I hung on, an adult living at home, while my mother manipulated redundant doctors for redundant benzodiazepine prescriptions. She peeled one day from the next, enthroned in a recliner, hollering demands in slurred speech. When she started to stash vodka in the garage and in bushes outside, she could barely stumble to those hiding places without falling. The alcohol, compounded by unregulated doses of Valium, Klonopin, and Xanax, caused ataxia that inhibited her motor skills. Soon I was washing shit stains out of her pants and mopping vomit off the floor. She was so frequently unconscious when I returned home from work that the response became mechanical: call ambulance, follow to hospital, receive lecture from emergency room doctor. They all told me that she would die if she kept it up, but she didn’t die. My father spent twice as much money on rehab programs for her than I borrowed in student loans, but she never stayed clean.

When my parents finally divorced I was relieved. However, after an onslaught of sniveling phone calls from Karen, I moved into her single room apartment to serve as cook, cleaning woman, and caretaker. Chasing benzos with vodka caused permanent brain damage, so even when she was sober she struggled with day to day normalcy. The lasting effects also made it difficult to detect when she started using again, but before

long it was obvious. I came home from work to seven empty Nyquil bottles and scattered puddles of unsettling green vomit. The following day I confronted her, but communication seemed impossible. There was nothing human reciprocated by that slack-eyed stare. I filled a laundry basket with my things and walked out. At the top of the outdoor stairwell, I felt a furious shove. My fall down the flight of stone steps was broken somewhat by the splintering laundry basket and its softer contents.

“Fuck you, you worthless piece of shit!” Karen wailed, and stumbled back to her apartment. No bones were broken, but my knees are still scarred.

In the kitchen at Uncle Ron’s house, everyone was romanticizing Marjorie. I didn’t mind. My cousins shared their fond memories over potato salad. Grandma’s bedtime songs, her skill at playing organ or piano, her festive Christmas decorations, her cranberry sauce. I loved her as much as anybody there, maybe more. I embraced her flaws. In her later years, when I knew her, my grandmother was a recluse. Relations with her siblings and friends faded to vague correspondences, and once in a while, one of them would die. Any new possibilities were subtly rebuffed. She kept to her small apartment. She chatted with checkout clerks at the local Albertsons, but superficially. She rarely entertained visitors, although she welcomed her grandchildren. The rest were adults with busy lives when my sister and I were fixtures in her home. She picked us up from school and fed us dinner regularly. We stayed over on weekends. By the time I was five, I could dial my grandmother on the telephone and ask for rescue when my parents were fighting. My sister and I built Lego metropolises while Marjorie ate tomato sandwiches and

watched *Oprah*. She taught us how to cook, how to sew, how to choose ripe cantaloupes and avocados, how to make the most of coin-operated laundry facilities. Each summer, she strolled us through the grounds of her apartment complex, along walkways strewn with the feathery crimson petals of crepe myrtle trees, to the swimming pool. She preferred the hours when no one was there. While my sister and I swam, the pool to ourselves, Marjorie sat umbrellaed like an empress of the shade, sipping iced tea. Her aloofness was comforting. It meant we were okay on our own. We needn't depend on anyone else.

Aunt Adele eyed me coolly as I brought a cracker to my lips.

"How much weight have you gained during your pregnancy, Katrina?"

"Twenty-five pounds," I answered, and put the cracker down.

"Don't gain anymore!" she yelled, giving my shoulders a firm pinch.

"You look beautiful. Don't listen to my mother," my cousin Kassia chimed in.

She hadn't announced it yet, but she was three months pregnant with her fourth child at the time. "I gained thirty-five pounds with Angela and the weight came right off."

"I gained sixty pounds when I was pregnant with you," someone grumbled over my shoulder. It was my mother's voice, struggling against drug-induced incomprehensibility. She had found me at last. I hastily excused myself from the kitchen.

Marjorie and Albert married and divorced each other more than once. The photo albums and loose photos scattered across Uncle Ron's coffee table told the story. Black and white: together, apart. Color: together, apart. Albert always had other women, even

several on the side when he and Marjorie were together. My grandmother never cheated. She never dated anyone when she was on her own. Men, even nice men, could show interest, but she denied them all. When I was old enough, I wondered what her standards were, if no one besides Albert could meet them.

In 1982 Marjorie left Albert for the last time. I was the reason, or my mother was, depending on the point of view. My grandparents were technically divorced, but living together in a condo thirty minutes from my parents' house. Marjorie came home to my mother's car pitched across the front lawn, through a slaughter of begonias. Karen was passed out drunk at the wheel. I was not yet two and unrestrained, fogging the back windows with my sobs, pounding the glass with two small fists. Grandma opened the door and saved me. A few months later she moved out of Albert's condo and into an apartment two blocks from our house. My mother left me in Marjorie's care nearly every day. It's the one time I benefitted from Karen's selfishness.

Clustered around the coffee table, thumbing through photos, my cousins, my sister, my husband and I swapped stories. I was crying again, so my husband wrapped me in an arm. I wondered if my unborn baby felt waves of grief as they washed through my body. I wondered if it was somehow bad for him, all that sadness.

"What's the matter?" my cousin, Konrad, asked. It struck me as an odd question, even in that moment.

"I just really miss her," I answered, wiping my cheeks with bare hands.

"Who? Your mom?"

I stifled a bitter laugh. “No,” I clarified, “Grandma.”

“Oh,” he sighed, perplexed.

I didn’t understand why he didn’t understand. When he asked to borrow my car keys, I just assumed I had parked in the wrong place, blocking something.

Karen was one of the first people to leave Uncle Ron’s house. When the door slammed shut, I felt an oxygen rush, like every wall fell open. I lingered throughout the afternoon. Talk turned to the everyday. I caught up with my cousins. When my husband and I were ready to leave, we looked for Marjorie’s urn in the living room, but the fireplace hearth was empty. My Uncle Ron and Aunt Carole were nested together on the couch.

“Uncle Ron, where is Grandma?” I asked.

“Doug took her, to be next to Albert,” he answered. My grandfather had been dead for several years. Uncle Doug kept Grandpa’s ashes on a bookshelf in his den.

“Why did you let him?” I prodded. Admittedly, I was shocked.

“It’s what she wanted. She asked for this, the day we called in hospice. You missed that meeting. You were at a doctor’s appointment.”

I couldn’t believe it. She never told me.

My car was still parked where I left it. When I opened the trunk to put the cake plate away, I understood why Konrad had borrowed the keys. There was a toy box for the baby. It was from my mother. Inside there was an outfit, some toys, a blanket, some books.

“Oh, *Goodnight Moon*, I loved that book,” my husband said.

“What about this one?” I asked, and passed him *The Runaway Bunny*.

He flipped through the pages. “I don’t know this one.”

“You’re not missing much.” I tossed everything back in the box and slammed the trunk closed.

The toy box lived in the trunk for several days. Finally, I went out to the car and opened it again. I decided what to throw away.

The Magic of Childhood

I woke to gold, glitter-dusted footprints the size of thimbles. They littered my pillow, shimmering in morning light as sleep stuck to me. The tooth was gone. In its place: a freshly minted Kennedy half dollar crisscrossed with a bow of lavender embroidery thread. My small fingers unrolled a tiny note coiled like a scroll. *Dear Katrina, what a beautiful tooth. It will make an equally beautiful star in my night sky collection. Thank you for sharing it with me. Love, the Tooth Fairy.*

It was often like this. The Easter Bunny buried my favorite candy in mounds of crinkling plastic grass, arranged elaborate egg hunts, and left a trail of half-eaten carrots with the leaves still attached. At Christmas, sooty footprints encircled treasure towers beneath the tree and reindeer left their bells behind. Leprechauns upended our home each year on Saint Patrick's Day. I found bananas screwed into lamp sockets like bulbs, furniture balanced precariously one piece upon another toward the ceiling. A trail of shamrocks ended in a pot of foil-wrapped chocolate coins. One year the Halloween scarecrow from our front lawn disappeared. My mother said he came to life and joined a traveling circus. So much theatrical, physical evidence. I believed it all.

Rising carefully not to disturb the footprints, I ran to my mother's room.

"I can't believe it!" she said, grinning like the wolf who ate grandma, scooping me into a hard squeeze.

"You are such a lucky, lucky little girl. The tooth fairy doesn't even visit every house, you know." My mother's skin was always slightly greasy. She smelled of garlic,

and a masking cloud of amber incense. Insomnia's rings and yesterday's makeup. Her grey eyes gleamed like thumb-worn quarters.

"This is very special," she said. The reminder was frequent. I was special. We were special. Mom, dad, sister, me. What a lucky, lucky family.

When the Tooth Fairy is so demonstrable (or Santa Claus, or the Easter Bunny, or leprechauns) how can a child discern reality from fiction? The existence of monsters was certain. If thriving, supernatural beings moved freely throughout the world, there must be as many bad as there were good. Swimming pools harbored sharks and plesiosaurs. Microscopic by day, they grew to formidable sizes under cover of night. And sports cars couldn't be trusted. They were driven by ancient, bronze-armored knights with praying mantis heads. My sister saw things too. Gremlins, she called them, and pointed to the flicker of red eyes that followed her from every dark corner. My mother never attempted to dissuade us. After all, the world was dangerous. She warned that children who lingered too long at the lips of creeks and rivers were carried off by pixies. Where our nightmares left off, our mother's stories always picked up.

By the time I turned eight, my mom was far more interested in alien abductions than she was in leprechauns. I remember the book *Communion* propped open in her hands. The strange face on the dust jacket, its eggshell skin and beetle-black eyes. Mom devoured that book. She traded her New Age crystal-palmers for meetings of alien abduction survivors. They came to our house. They pushed living room furniture to the perimeter. They sat in a circle. They whispered. They cried. And I eavesdropped, convinced that my life depended on it. The stories sounded true. The details felt real.

Paralysis at night. Odd lights through the window. Weightlessness. And the menacing shuffle of bodies through the room. They called the aliens *greys*, or *visitors*. All that was more than enough for me, but my mom tried so damn hard sometimes.

“It happens every night,” she said over her coffee one morning, narrowing her eyes.

“What happens?” I asked, reeling my attention in from somewhere distant.

“We’re abducted. Aliens take us out of our beds and onto their ships. It happened last night again. I woke up paralyzed.” She bit down hard on the last word, stiffening her jaw.

I thought of *Wild America*. Of rattlesnakes and small rodents they ate. I wanted to impress my mother, to let her know I understood the word. “Like you couldn’t move?”

“No. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t even scream.”

I flinched at this intimate confession. “You wanted to scream?”

“Of course.” The creases deepened between her eyebrows.

“Why? Did it hurt?”

“Yes. Terribly,” she answered, mustering a mild tremor for dramatic effect. Panic rising, I scrambled for details.

“What happens on the ships?”

“The aliens do experiments.”

“What kind?” I asked, already filling in blanks.

“I don’t know, but my body feels different, like they have done something to my womb.”

Far outside the realm of my experience, but I imagined babies. Then their faces changed, eyes growing wide and dark. There was a diving pinch in my gut.

“What do they want?” I asked.

“To study us. To learn about us. To change our lives.” These words must have been intended to reassure me, as her voice lifted up on stilts of inspiration. Anaphora was one of her tics. She was a born orator.

“Do they take daddy?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Do they take Kirsten?”

“Yes.”

“Do they take me?”

“Yes.”

The horror.

“How can they get into our house if the door is locked?”

“They have ways. Teleportation. Certain angles of light.” The concept was familiar, as I had watched a lot of Star Trek. But there was warmth in television. This was reality, and sinister.

“Can’t we call the police?”

“No. The police can’t do anything.”

I twisted in my chair. “I don’t want to be abducted.”

“Nobody can stop them.”

Her fingernails rippled against her ceramic cup. I stared outside at tangible things. The rusty swing set. The empty pool.

“Why do they want to take us, momma?”

“Because they chose us. Because we’re special.”

And that was the point. The attention she required could come from anyone, even someone imaginary and monstrous. I don’t know if she really believed her own stories, but it doesn’t matter, because I believed them. I stockpiled evidence in the form of nightmares. I knew what alien abductors looked like, sounded like, smelled like. I knew the soft, menacing thump of their feet beside my bed, their clicking whispers. I knew the glint of moonlight as it clipped the volcanic glass of each convex eye.

“What do you remember about mom’s alien stories?” I ask my sister, Kirsten, on the phone. We are adults. We can talk about this rationally.

“Not a lot, really. I was young,” she says.

“You were. If I was eight then you must have been—”

“Four or five. Yeah.”

It’s late. She’s had a long day at work. Her voice is raspy from a cold.

“So you don’t remember anything specific?”

“Not from back then. I mean, I knew we were all supposedly abducted. But usually my nightmares were about other weird things. Remember the pig-man?”

I do. One Christmas Kirsten dreamt that a huge, filthy pig ran out from under our tree. It chased her, snarling and grunting. When Kirsten was cornered, the pig closed in,

lifting its head in triumph. She saw that a man's bloody face and torso had been stitched to the pig's throat and underbelly. The man was angry, or was it anguished? The dream was so gruesome that I remember it today as if it were my own.

"Yeah," I answer. "That dream was fucked up."

"It's crazy, but I was never afraid of anything real, like burglars or murderers."

"Neither was I."

"I have one memory about aliens though," she says. "I had a vivid dream when I was about ten or eleven, when I was sleeping on the futon in dad's office."

I had forgotten.

"Do you remember the sticker they put on the office door? Alien Workshop?"

Kirsten asks. I picture it. The logo of a skateboard company. My mom didn't even know what it meant, but she bought the sticker anyway. It had an alien's face on it. Big black eyes, guitar-pick shaped head. She stuck it to the tinted glass of the office door.

"Yeah, I remember."

"I dreamt that I woke up frozen in the middle of the night. I was staring at the office door, and staring back at me from behind the glass was the same face, right there next to the face on the sticker. A grey." The terminology has been our background noise for decades. "It was horrible. So scary. It just glared at me. I couldn't move or scream."

"Did you tell mom?"

"Yeah. She was thrilled that I was visited. She didn't understand how scared I felt. I don't remember much more than that."

“Mom acted like it was so natural,” I say. “Then The X-Files came out I realized everything she told us was bullshit. There would be an episode about greys on the show, you know, but then there would be one about a genie or a chupacabra, silly stuff, and I could see it was all fake.”

My sister laughs. “Actually, looking back, that made things worse for me. I thought any of those other things could be just as real. What about Mommy Monster?”

Provoked or unprovoked, our mother would thunder after us like a Bengal tiger. Hurl herself around corners. Shatter the glass in picture frames. Chase us into closets. Growl. Gnash her teeth. Claw at our skin.

“She thought it was so funny.”

“But sometimes she was angry.”

“Her eyes would bulge out.”

“I was scared to death of her.”

“Me too,” I say. “Was that what she wanted?”

“Maybe it didn’t matter if it was fun or scary, as long as she felt it was real.”

We say goodbye and I hang up the phone. I can feel sorry for my mother. Something made her that way. But I’m also pissed. Lacking an honest anchor, my entire childhood bobbed from hoax to hoax. My mom filled my head with nonsense, out of selfishness, so she could feel special. And she invented an audience of creeps.

Closing my bedroom window, I look out on a backyard made larger and wilder by the acolorless night. In the darkness, tiny voids crop up. A spectrum of negative spaces. Over there, behind the raised bed, perfect for a raccoon. Or up there, in the lemon tree, a

niche for a bat. Or there, in the corner, where the ivy hangs low and the fences meet, a nook for something child-sized. Something with large, dark eyes. Something peeking out from behind the shivering vines. A visitor.

I always have to digest what I am seeing or not seeing, and talk myself out of imaginative leaps and surrenders to anxiety. Even when I turn away from the window, I do it slowly. I'll never shake the feeling that something has been waiting.

Endnotes

1. From *Candide*, an 18th century, satirical bildungsroman by Voltaire. See, especially, chapters 1 and 30. Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003.
2. See chapters 3 and 4 of *Best Words, Best Order*, by Stephen Dobyns. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
3. From “An Essay on Criticism,” *The Collected Works of Alexander Pope*. Art & Poetry Publishing, 2012.
4. See chapter 5 of *Death and the Labrynth*, by Michel Foucault. Continuum, 2004.
5. See Act 4, Scene i, of *King Lear*, by William Shakespeare. Barnes & Noble, 2007.
6. From “At North Farm,” *A Wave*, by John Ashbery. Penguin Books, 1985.
7. The poem of inspiration is “Whitman, 1841,” from Rick Barot’s collection, *Chord*. Sarabande, 2015.