

(Un)Becoming Carolyn

I am (un)becoming (of) my grandmother.
Her willowy, lissome, lithe body
perched upon a splintering, wooden porch swing.
Double fisting a Virginia Slim—
filter stained by Elizabeth Arden-lipstick—a bitter,
unsugared coffee embraced by slender fingers;
talons glossed in Revlon Raven Red.
She in a plaid robe cast over a nightgown of scarlet silk;
pedicured toes pinched in sized ten, thrift store slippers.
Her thick, sable mane—indicative of Cherokee ancestry—
in a bobbed bouffant with hints of White Diamonds cologne.
Gracile, long legs crossed
one over the other.

In stature, I stand five inches diminished,
swaybacked, and stocky on the patio of my parents' home.
The oversized graphic t-shirt
I did not return to my ex-partner
and my father's / her son's vintage, checkered jacket
hang past stout, muscled trunks of thigh and down to scarred knees.
My flat soled and calloused, sized eight feet
and buttocks bare to the late lingering,
winter-chilled Virginia breeze carrying flakes of March snow.
Tattooed, hyperhidrosis-laden hands
ending in unadorned, anxiety-bitten fingernails
cling to a cream and sugared cup of joe.
An American Spirit
clenched between unpainted, chapped lips.
Waist length, honey blonde tresses
streaked with remnants of Manic Panic teal hair dye
and unscented except for tinges of nicotine and tobacco
and the off-brand shampoo of yesterday's shower.
Fired from my job. Castaway by my first love and ex-partner.
Marooned in the makeshift, unfinished basement
bachelorette pad in which I freeload as the vagrant,
stereotypical millennial in the home of my parents.
Offering to pay rent with my unemployment checks.
Gobbling up my parents' wifi
interrupting the internet connection
as I apply to hundreds of jobs daily.

A disoriented/tated twenty-five year old who has only given
my parents a grandchild in
the form of an equally

displaced and traumatized rescue dog
and prescribed the same Xanax dosage as I.

Hidden bottles of champagne, marijuana edibles,
and cigarettes consumed in (un)confidence—
“you’re killing yourself with those cancer sticks,”
people say, unaware I revel in this idea.
Drugs and toxins ingested to forget
for an hour, for a few minutes, for a singular moment.

I lost nineteen pounds of bodily
weight in less than fourteen days
from lack of sleep, lack of appetite, lack of ability—
under the strain—to keep the nauseating anxiety
at bay. This anatomical, animistic, cognizant
vessel and mentally ill brain committing cerebral homicide,
conspiring against me.

Maybe, it is time I take
my horse out of the race.
I betted the twelve dollars to my name
on a horse at Ponies & Pints
in downtown Richmond. The one night
I endeavored to enjoy an evening pretending
not to be in the situation I am in.
Pretending I have (not) quit
bumming smokes, pretending I can pay for my own
drinks, pretending this life is not mine.
Pretending I am fine as my brother and his friends
win more than 1,200 dollars between them.

Hungover the next day,
eating ribs at Mission BBQ,
I discover my losing #2 pony’s name:
“Given Up on Dreaming.”
My older brother and I laugh
at the pathetic, hilarious irony until I cry.

On my left wrist, a sprawl of helixed hedera—
almost concealing thick, white, kitchen knife-carved scars—

a needle-in-ink memorial to my undiagnosed depression-riddled
grandmother stolen by breast cancer
and to her Vietnam War-(mi)s(a)ppropriated husband.
His ChapStick and Army dog tag etched
with his name, social security number, blood type, and religious preference
returned with nonexistent remains, a Purple Heart,
an oaken box of medals, and a folded star-spangled flag.
Carolyn and Johnny, in life and love, always “clinging
to one another like ivy.”

Carolyn, born in 1943, an independent and individualistic
firecracker from her teenage years on, or perhaps the moment she exited
Great Grandma Adelaide’s womb.
Bold and vibrant as the costume jewelry she donned
and the shades of red painted on her nails and lips.
Made a widowed wife and mother at twenty-four, my father aged six
and his brother just three. Men tried to date her.
She was the spitting image of Elizabeth Taylor.
Once a car salesman refused to move his Cadillac
intentionally parked behind her bright orange 1968 Mercury Cougar.
He would not cede until she agreed to go out with him.
When the man refused to remove his convertible, she
switched gears to reverse, hit the gas, and backed her fiery
coupe to force his out of the way.
“I’m going to get fired!”
She and her young sons hoped he would.

During her second marriage,
she put a .38 Special to the forehead
of her abusive (eventual) ex-husband, threatening
if he ever laid his hands on her children again
she would shoot him dead.

When she was lost / when I lost her,
I was fourteen on the cusp of adolescence.
I would soon hit puberty, a late bloomer.
Mother Nature granting / cursing me with menstruation, hormonal changes.
Grandma Carolyn and I could talk until our mouths ran dry;
we could sit in quiet, honeyed harmony.
She introduced me to Charlie Pride, Jerry Lee Lewis, Fats Domino,

horror movies and Westerns, Waffle House,
how to dress and carry yourself as if you were
not impoverished, midnight madness sales, Gone with the Wind,
and that women are never “too pretty to talk / act like that.”
She once met John Wayne in the airport, surely
enamored by her natural beauty and straight shootin’, distinctive personality.

She was sixty-one years young in hospice at my Uncle GJ’s home.
A mere skeletal encasement for a wisp thin ghost of her spirit.
Her body remained, but her essence had long departed.
Her lizard green irises and yellow-rimmed pupils—
twin with mine—were vacant. She took her final breaths
as my father / her son begged
I come and see her. I refused, never regretting this decision.

At twenty-five, I ousted Steve,
my cocaine addicted / dealing, alcoholic, abused-as-a-child boyfriend.
I once allowed him to nearly choke me to death, reasoning at the time
it might help him heal. Three months later, he was arrested for pummeling
the socket of my right eye. I could not hide the nightshade blue bruise and I did not try.
The first and last time he assaulted my dog, Luna,
I broke his nose gushing blood, Luna cornered him snarling
in the bathroom, and I kicked him out of my home.

At thirty, I evicted my (soon to be) ex-husband, Chris,
a best friend of more than eight years. He metamorphosed into Mr. Hyde
two days post-marriage. Undiagnosed intermittent explosiveness
and borderline personality disorder. A cache cocktail of scripts
consumed spasmodically—Klonopin, Viagra, Prozac, Adderall, Xanax—
chased round-the-clock by chewing tobacco, nicotine, weed, and a double Old Fashioned
disguised in a to-go coffee mug. Bound legally by a governmental piece of paper; separated
by a Remington shotgun barrel, Luna’s bared teeth, 552 miles, and an order of protection.

Two of the many occurrences Grandma Carolyn
spoke to / came to me / came to mind (?):
the top floor of a parking garage and a bridge above the Tennessee River
nearly seven years ago and eight years after her death.
Separate instances in Knoxville as I contemplated suicide.
Not yet diagnosed as Bipolar and a mentally ill brain trying to commit cerebral homicide.

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I heard / sensed (?) her Southern, slightly ghetto accent,
“Girl, what the hell are you doin’? This ain’t it.”
I walk/ed away from the ledges.

I am thirty-one. I sink to the bathroom floor; towel loosely wrapped
around my anxiety-riddled body.

Dry heaves scratch frantically at my constricted throat.

The meager food in my stomach begins to sour.

On the lowest shelf of a cabinet, I see—
through blurred, glassy, lizard green eyes—
the perfume my grandmother wore.

I set aside the undrank bottle of Sheldrake rosé
and remove the faux golden-plated White Diamonds cap,
inhaling slowly, deliberately
as best I can through congested nasal passages.

I feel Grandma Carolyn’s nails again
against the soft skin of my childhood.

A John Wayne picture plays. I hear
the smoker’s rasp of her low, yet sweetly
feminine timbre as she
whispers into my ear.

The bottle of wine remains sealed.

The tears resume but, this time,
more controlled, more quietly, more accepting.
Partly, in missing her.

Once upon a time, I was religious. I once bowed
my unshaven head, cast my eyes to the ground,
dropped a less broken body free of tattoos,
knelt with less damaged knees to pray.

I once talked to the sky
in the chance the heavens existed
and held her spirit.

Presently, I perform soliloquies
internally for her / me.