

Joan of Arc at Six

Kick the boy who steals
Your crayons during arts
And crafts in the shins
And when he starts to cry
And you get sent to the principal's
Office, stand proud and defiant
In your jelly shoes. Remember
The way your arms feel
Crossed in front of your flat
Chest. Stand this way
Whenever men try to take
What does not belong to them.

Inheritance

My grandmother gave me
Her Southern duplicity:
If you hide arsenic
In enough sweet tea,
No one can taste it.

My father gave me
A taste for bourbon
And the sea, a pirate
Marooned in a landlocked
State and a century
Without privateers.
His ashes are in the sea
Now, and for the first
Time I have the feeling
That he is at peace.

My brother gave me
Fear and a closet
Deep enough to hide
All my secrets in.
In his he has comic
Books, toys from when
He was a child, things
He can't enjoy now
That he's a man.
In mine hides
My girlfriend.
Our closets are not
Altogether different.

My grandfather gave me
His mania and an ear
For the banjo. He lost
A finger because he refused
To stop making,
Even when the Parkinson's
Plucked at his muscles
Like he plucked at banjos
And mandolins and anything
Else with strings.
I can't sleep at night
For hearing the music
Of my ancestors
And the business of my hands.

My mother gave me
Her accent, crisp
And flat as a Michigan
Winter. When I laugh
And call her “Yank,”
She reminds me
That we sound
The same.

My countless, unnamed
Ancestresses gave me
Defiance and a fear
Of enclosed spaces, girls
Who married too young,
Who never left their
Hometowns, who tasted
Honeysuckle on their papas’
Fences and wore their skirts
Too short. If I prayed
I would pray for the ghosts
Of them that roost
In the trees of our family’s farm.

I gave myself
A pen and paper
And the unofficial duty
Of scribe.
I will not forget
Those who came before me,
And I will not be forgotten
By those who come after.
I will not be nameless.
I will remember.

A Brief Inventory of Summer, Age 15

The stale taste of water from a garden hose
The honey-thick drench of gold over the dusty green lawn
A tattered copy of *The Virgin Suicides*
Feet stained green on the bottoms
The hum of cicadas, that crawls under your skin and won't leave,
 Until you hear it when you are trying to sleep,
 Until you hear it in the dead of winter
The screen of your bedroom dormer window
 (Removed so you could dangle your feet into the sticky air)
A blot of rust-brown on the fence, where you cut your knee trying to jump over
 (You're not sure to where)
The feeling of the hips you've newly acquired straining against your cutoffs
The sultry taste of strawberries staining your lips bloody
The view of the horizon that stretched on, and on, and on
 While you sat on your parents' porch,
 A girl trapped in amber.

What They Never Tell You

I.

They never tell you
When you're a girl
And you want to be Atalanta,
Chasing after golden apples,
That you come from a family
Of poor runners, people
With short legs and confused
Feet, except for your brother,
Who stands tall and broad
As Hector, and shoots down
Your dreams as easily as Patroclus.

II.

They never tell you
When your father dies
That you don't miss him correctly,
But you know there is something
Wrong when you don't cry,
Standing like a stoic next to your
Weeping mother. Sometimes you worry
That you're the one that's died,
More statue of Athena than girl,
Hiding beneath your plumed helmet,
Behind your spear. It is safer that way.

III.

They never tell you
(Outwardly, anyway)
That they're disappointed in you,
Disappointed in your useless degree,
In your short hair and tattoos,
In the way you're all hard edges,
Hard to love, but they try anyway,
And you're grateful. You fear
That you are not what they wanted,
And you pray that you are wrong.

IV.

What you never tell them
Is that you still want to be Atalanta,
That your bones still itch for running,
That what you want is "away,"
And that where "away" is doesn't
Matter. Somewhere the trees bear
Golden apples, and you want

To taste them and know the things
They know. But ghosts of your childhood
Grab at your ankles and you stay.
You come from a family of poor runners,
And your feet are just as clumsy as theirs.

V.

What they tell you is this:
That regardless of what old, white, male
Professors say, you are extraordinary:
The whole universe distilled into one
Girl-sized drop, that you are neither
Your anxiety, nor your degree.
That you can run as fast as your feet
Can carry you, but home will always
Be at your heels.

Pompeii

I slept through a tornado last night,
Woke up to pictures of people huddled
In basements as certain death loomed
Over their heads and then indifferently
Passed to go terrorize some other medium-
Sized college town. I slept right through
And woke up the next morning by the grace
Of sheer, dumb Luck. "How poetic," I thought,
Stirring my coffee. "The most exciting thing
I would have ever done would be to die."

But as I thought about it, what if
It had been a volcano instead?
What if instead of some anticlimactic little
Tornado skating across this city,
The primordial kettle boiling
Under Yellowstone finally began
To whistle and I was buried where I slept?
In a thousand years, some archaeologists
Would find me entombed in a mausoleum
Of post-adolescent mediocrity and fear
And laziness. "Ah, yes," they would say,
Typing on their tablets. "She had probably
Collapsed in horror of her student loan
Debts and low job prospects, just look
How she slept hugging the wall."

I sleep hugging the wall
Because that is where you should be and are not.
My body has grown around the space
Your absence occupies like vines growing
Around a trellis. Like e.e. cummings said:
"i carry your heart with me (i carry it in
my heart)," and my ribs and lungs
And heart have expanded around it.
I doubt the archaeologists would be able
To tell. The framed picture of us kissing,
The deck of cards on which you wrote
52 reasons why you loved me,
Would probably not survive the blanket
Of ash that would tuck me into bed
That final time.

So what would I have to show
For this measly collection of eighteen
Years? My books would probably burn,

My records would melt, the ring you
Gave me would be buried and lost forever.
I would be just another nameless
College student, scared of the future,
Alienating myself in my cloister of a dorm,
Exceptional only in my death.
They wouldn't know I had never
Been able to tell you one last time
That I loved you like drowning lungs
Love the thought of air, like magnets
Love their opposites, like a Roman ruin
Loves falling apart.
What can I show for my life
If not that I loved you,
And you loved me?
What else is there to show?