

Chronicles

1 I was ten, the same age as my FATHER when his FATHER died. We were living in the biblical lands of Moab and Jerusalem and Palestine. On a drive to the Jordan River, my FATHER erupted in song. In endless choruses, Joshua fit the battle of Jericho. Mary wept and Mary mourned. Michael rowed his boat ashore, again and again and again. "It ain't nessa, ain't nessa," my FATHER yowled, "—ain't necessarily so!"

2 Fifty years earlier, my FATHER was the CHILD traveling in the wake of his FATHER, a preacher who barbered for a living. They moved from haircut to haircut along the Mississippi River, to dusty towns with names of faraway places—Moab, Jerusalem, Palestine. On Sundays, though, he put aside his shears, and filled those peeling country churches, and his young son's mind, with whale-sized tales, of arks and frogs and Pharaohs, with songs about a mighty river—yes, it was wide and muddy, but milk and honey waited on the other side.

3 Sometimes, when he'd had enough to drink, my FATHER told me about the house with newsprint papering the walls. About the time his FATHER gave that year's shoe money to a hobo at the door. And, just once, about the simple operation, complicated by the infection penicillin came two years too late to cure. *Daddy*, he still called him. Mostly though, he curved his arm around his drink and pulled it closer. "What's past is past," he said, "the world's a bigger place than childhood." Years later, I saw a picture of the two of them, the sixty-year-old man and the ten-year-old boy, taken just before his FATHER died, standing as close as two people can stand and not touch.

4 When we got to the river of my FATHER'S songs, there were no whales. And Michael's shores were the same on both sides—bounded by thistles and barbed wire. But the Dust Bowl preacher's son took tea now with a king and rode camels with sheiks, a mediator in the conflict between the dispossessor and the dispossessed. By the time he left this ancient land, its bitter history of parallel pain, he had unearthed from its desert sands a mosaic frosted with Byzantine gold. Shards of iridescent Roman glass. And, from the Red Rose City of Petra, carved inconceivably in sheer rock walls, a little oil lamp of clay, ridged with Nabatean fingermarks.

5 I returned with my FATHER when he was sixty to the place he left when he was a boy. He drove us up and down the Mississippi, searching for chili, black and oily, at the counter of the long-gone Dew Chili Parlor. For a house where he used to play, beneath a porch where hillbilly uncles twanged fiddles and banjos and his mother's little dog, Pat Ponjuween, occupied his FATHER'S lap. We followed a listing in a phone book to a trailer by the highway where a woman with my FATHER'S name stared at us through a drooping screen. Nowhere was there any record of his FATHER. Nothing in the churches. Nothing in the town registers. Nothing in that flat empty land but strip malls on the edge of a muddy river. By 5 o'clock each day, we were sitting in a parking lot outside a liquor store. When our two weeks were up, he chose a headstone for the unmarked grave. Pink. Granite. "Christ," he said, unscrewing the lid of that night's bottle. "If I lived here I'd kill myself." I couldn't help remembering that photograph: the CHILD'S hands dangling from the cuffs of the outgrown jacket; the FATHER'S clasped, unreachable, behind him.

Just a Little Sadness

When my mother one afternoon years after
my father's death looked across the kitchen table
and asked me *What does depression feel like?*
cocking her head at me in anthropological inquiry,
I didn't believe it. I looked at her,
half-smiling. I examined her face,
to see whether she was joking or mocking
him. And, then, with decades of guarded practice,
I led her, step by step,
through the logic of it: his cyclical darkness,
the medicinal clink of the bottles
he drained, his nocturnal talks
with the cat, one eye closed to focus his bleared vision.
Have you never been depressed? I asked her.
And she tilted her head to the other side,
as if to loosen an obstruction or roll the thought
toward the hole from a different angle.
Maybe, she said, *sometimes*, digging at the palm
of one hand with the fingers of the other. *But it's just a little sadness
passing through.* I sat back slowly.
If after thirty-five years at the same breakfast table
with it, thirty-five years in the same bed with it, she still
could not recognize it, there was nothing
I could do to explain to her, her strange absence
of feeling, or his lifelong surfeit of it. Beyond the window
stretched the beauty she knows how to love: Orderly
rows of vineyards, leafy arms linked
over one another's shoulders; olive trees cragged as men;
processionals of cypresses, filtering the wind,
two by two; tiny sheep across the valley
pilling the green velour of new fields, the same way they do
in the famous paintings she knows intimately.
I looked at my mother and remembered
nights at that same table, my father and I,
harmonizing to jazz, show tunes, torch songs
from his youth—remembered also the terrible depths
of his sudden griefs, their cold implacable currents,
stranding me there, on a distant shore,
my heartbeat the muted bell of a buoy.
My mother had appeared mid-verse one night, a specter
on the landing at the bottom of the steps that led,
in a dark tunnel behind her, to the second floor.
It's three o'clock, she said, glazing this landscape—
the blind-drunk husband, the rumped cat, the song-hoarse child
—with her hoarfrost appraisal. *I'm trying to sleep.*

Reading Poetry for Breakfast

In the poem, a father's weight sinks a daughter's
attic mattress, while at the foot of the stairs

a mother stands immobile.
A brother dies, finally, of an illness

that is never named. It necessitates
a needle through his eye

once a week, his lover to tell
him, during a moment of lucidity,

that he is still handsome. In my kitchen
I chase scallions with an awkward knife

my brother gave me. He has lived in Italy
for the ten (fifteen? twenty?) years since

my father died. Briefly blond, now bald,
my brother is known in the village

by the name he had as a child. No father
ever climbed the attic stairs in our house;

no child's mattress ever bore
his weight, but a mother stood by blind,

as a car idled in the moonless driveway
where the director of the boys choir

fingered her sleeping son's corn silk hair
and, at the kitchen table, as a father steeped

in bourbon impregnated his captive daughters
with fear and self-doubt. My brother laughs

at the things he's lost. Hair. Wallets. Address books.
Passports. He keeps a store of jokes, lines from movies.

But he cannot, he says, remember anything
from childhood. The knife he gave me is, like all his gifts,

excessive. For scallions, I do not need a blade
five inches long, four wide. That kind of knife, I think,

you call a cleaver.

Telegram

got up STOP period STOP 10 days early STOP fuck whoever designed menopause STOP
back to bed with book STOP Henry VIII bored with Anne Boleyn STOP fuck Henry
VIII STOP checked work email STOP message from student smarter than me STOP
STOP STOP tried getting up again STOP to-do list says sort office clean house
file papers groceries bills wisteria Craigslist STOP conscience says fuck Tudors
and to-do list catch up on Middle East STOP sweetheart says fuck Middle East do
something you can control STOP nobody anywhere says what to do about despair
STOP swam 13 minutes of 30-minute swim STOP stopped STOP goggles fogged with
tears STOP headed to store accompanied by Bach STOP unstoppable tears STOP 50
years old suffocating at work incapable of imagining what else STOP parked car
STOP swabbed tears STOP oatmeal chocolate butter STOP home STOP cookies for
block party STOP let down blinds in kitchen STOP exuberant 7-yr-old boy across
street singing so loudly his mother tells him to stop STOP he can't

Going, Going, Gone

She appears one spring morning
like a sprite, in a chute of light
slanting through unpruned vines.
A visitation. A mirage of vibrancy.
Three or four years old, fists locked
proudly on the (pink!) handles
of the smallest scooter I've ever seen.
Sunny though it is, she's Michelined
in a padded jacket—pink!
—and nothing else. No shirt.
No pants. No socks. No shoes.
The front is unzipped and the back flares out,
a stiff cape with little quilted wings.

Across the street I'm treadmilling vaguely
homeward, damp and tired and itchy-eyed,
from the pool where, daily, I swim laps.
Shapeless in my terry cloth poncho
and plastic sandals, my head turbaned
in a towel, I'm about as underdressed
as one can legally publicly be. But this child
has me beaten by a mile.

“Look where I'm *GO*-ing!” she calls
over her shoulder. She kicks off with one foot
and the tiny scooter flashes forward,
metallic paint glinting, her buttocks two pale petals,
her hair a tangled wreath of bedhead,
in that rare filigree of spun gold and rat's nest
that only very small children possess.
“Look where I'm *GO*-ing!
Look where I'm *GO*-ing!”

At a distance behind her stroll
two adults that might be hers, neutered
to generic silhouettes,
their only distinctive feature
the mitted shape of the mug at the end
of each right-angled arm. A car rolls by.
From the open door of a garage, a radio drones
horrors. A plane trails a tired veil of white.
A quiet man I've met before (Al? Pete? Gus?)
pushes in a stroller a grizzled dog
with cataracts. Two weeks ago,
that same dog was still pulling itself along
on the wheeled frame Al-Pete-Gus had built

to replace its collapsed hind legs.

“Look where I’m *GO*-ing!” trumpets the child
with hair of gold and buttocks ripe as fruit.

She pumps a cartoon leg with everything
she’s got and shoots down the sidewalk
in increments of eight, ten, twelve inches,
leaving in her wake the blind, deaf dog, the radio
no one is listening to, the tired swimmer,
the vanishing contrail. I hoist my swim bag
higher on my shoulder, my suit (pink,
as it happens) a sodden wad I’ll hang to dry
before I pull it on tomorrow, and in it,
one more time, shuttle up and down
the same lane I’ve swum for years.

Where? I want to call
to her before she disappears
into the shadows. *Where?*

