

Amethyst

It's too cold here. Even for me.

The shadows harken to a time before this time. I perceive a streak of light, so blinding I can only see the veins of my eyes, the red swirls of stars under my eyelids. I will die here: alone, almost, and alone altogether.

Before I die, however, I should tell you about my life: as a warning, a memory, and maybe even a parable, of sorts. This is my last testament, the vestigial remnants of my will.

Ah yes, I will die here, surely, and for many who knew me, a fitting end.

"The bitch is dead," they will smile and whisper.

The bitch is dead. At last, at last.

1:

My name is Catherine. I was born to a couple of teachers in Burlington, Vermont, a year after the end of the Second World War.

Vermont is a wonder to see with its milk flowing clean and white. Traveling through family farms and organic pastures, anyone would enjoy its artisanal cheeses and meats; its many mountains and hills of green, its majestic lakes that sparkle and gleam over shiny stones and rocky shores. Ah, but its winters marveled me most of all, snowfall after snowfall replenishing the vast white and white, light blue of snow and ice over vast landscapes, seemingly forever; until winter finally gives way to spring.

Yet, from an early age, I understood nature to be both beautiful and treacherous: I could not have been more than four when I saw a spider, magnificent and orange with near-iridescent white spots, her fat abdomen undulating ever so, as she dined on a butterfly. There, on the northern side of our house, under a massive red maple tree, its leaves already beginning to turn in early autumn, was my first lesson in death: its cruelty, its arbitrary, even capricious ways, its coldness (for it knows nothing of beauty or ugliness, beautiful things can be deadly and can die), its ubiquity, its immutable quality.

The butterfly's wings flickered and fluttered as it struggled; it writhed as it was being eaten alive, the spider's venom already working to liquefy the butterfly inside out, the spider's mandibles mightily moving, the butterfly slowly, finally, limp and lifeless in the center of the web this shamrock orbweaver weaved.

Even at this age, I knew what I was witnessing was a necessary, yet sad act, and I knew the scene was somehow, and indelibly, sinister. Still, I watched this murder until my mother found me in a near state of shock.

I cried as she picked me up, held me, and shushed me. “Shhhh. It’s just life needing life to continue. Something has to die. Something always has to die, Cathy.”

Her words gave me no comfort. Only the softness and warmth of her breasts, the care of her caress, comforted me.

The image of the orbweaver dining on the butterfly burned into the part of the brain where records are eternal, where, generations later, the smells and sights and sounds of the particular memory in question are easily and vividly recalled. The word I’m looking for is trauma, or something very near it. This mundane act, the act of predation, taught me more than most other lessons ever would:

The world kills and the world eats.

My mother was a pretty woman. Petite, her blond hair, in long waves and curls, and her crystal blue eyes, almost always reassured me. She stood maybe five feet, three inches tall, but she seemed giant to my young, young eyes.

She was calm, even under pressure, and her smell, always of roses of a perfume lost to time, made right whatever was wrong.

She created elaborate dinners on Sundays, most of which were spent going to her parents’ farm, me playing with my favorite doll, “Elly,” looking at the horses lazily trotting in the noonday sun, the few dairy cows munching on golden hay.

The elaborate dinners were of roasted chicken and braised pork, apple cider and rice pilaf, lasagna fashioned in small tarts, rhubarb and cherry pies, the crust of which were made by real pig lard and whole, fresh butter, mounds of cornbread stuffing, broccoli casserole, sweet bread puddings with fat, pitted dates nearly the size of my small fists, apple trifles, fresh peasant bread, served with orange and strawberry preserves my grandfather made, pickled lemons, limeade, and French toast with real Vermont maple syrup. There are many other foods and drinks Mother and Grandfather made, but I cannot recall them all.

My maternal grandparents weren't really farmers at all, but professors at the local private college.

They retired to this farm not far from Burlington, in a town called Shelburne. My grandfather was tall as my own father, but very different in disposition. While my father was usually quiet and stern-looking, furrowed brow and hazel eyes under spectacles (which I am still convinced he wore to make himself look older than his years, as he had a very youthful visage about him, and, I suspect, felt he lacked the gravitas required of an assistant professor), my grandfather was very funny, smelling of good pipe smoke, leather, mints, and something of the outside, like how children smell after playing amongst their friends and the trees in the open air.

My grandmother was more like my father, fairly reserved, but age had mellowed out any need (if she ever had any) of seeming grave.

My grandfather liked to cook more than my grandmother, and so he and my mother would prepare Sunday dinner, which was more like a late lunch, as far as the time of day.

My mother, Clara, was a middle school teacher, not a professor like her parents and my father.

My father, Paul, was not prone to display much affection, and so, I think for some measure of compensation, Mother would shower kisses and hugs upon me. She'd lavish me with long bedtime stories from the big books, ancient and brown or black, from the family library housed on the first floor behind the living room. In this way, Mother taught me how to read at a very early age, at my bedside, introducing me to the many worlds and kingdoms these books had to offer.

Ah, for simple educators, my parents owned a stately manor. There were many rooms and bathrooms, and as an inquisitive child, an only child, I'd explore the many rooms with Elly, who I pretended was my sister and best friend, and talk to her as we opened door after door and walked down the halls of mahogany floors and original paintings of fruit and green pastures.

Elly, had she flesh and life, could have been my sister, as she also had blue eyes and light, almost platinum blond hair as I did, her skin the color of peach and cream pastels on canvas, her cheeks rosy as the promise from a lover.

I spent a lot of time at my grandparents' place, as both my parents worked, and my grandfather loved me more than life itself, and would not hear of me staying with strangers at a day care, or hiring a nanny. Working mothers with young children were very uncommon in those days, the days right after fascism fell, the days right after the red flags with black, crooked crosses of a place far away burned to ash, and evil, we thought, was banished from the earth forever.

But evil is as common and necessary as the orbweaver dining on a butterfly, and the human heart knows no end of depth nor width to receive and contain hatred of all manner and dimension.

The stately manor in which the Moore family lived (for that was my maiden name, Catherine Clara Moore), was actually inherited by my father, whose parents, wealthy and determined to help in the War, had died horrible deaths in Europe. My father's father, from gunfire in the south of France, my father's mother from a disease she contracted while caring for the sick and wounded in Italy. Both died at the end of the conflict, a few months apart; my father's father died first.

I learned this only as a young woman. My father rarely spoke to me at all, as if he was afraid his voice would crack my frame, or my speaking to him would unveil his being human, or interrupt his steady meditation on affecting, and finally, perfecting, the ideal image of a stoic. Sometimes, I think he wanted children simply to say he had continued the species.

It was no secret he was disappointed I wasn't a boy, as I heard him once saying as much in whispers at a dinner party for professors in the large den of our home.

Only when I began to understand the ways of this world did his words finally acquire an evil to them, the words that he fervently wanted a boy. At the time I heard them, I did not entirely understand their meaning. In truth, he wanted a boy because he was the last of his line, "no more Moores," he joked at the dinner party, dryly laughing as the other men, similar in shape, size, and disposition as my father, laughed too, cigarette smoke meandering in the air, barely moving, swirling, hanging in the stasis of the den like a lonely ghost.

My father wanted a boy because he wanted to continue his line. This logic required several assumptions to become true: that the boy would survive to sexual maturity, that the boy wanted to get married and have children, and so on.

Father often spoke of women, except for Clara, his wife, my mother, as though they were a burdensome, but entirely necessary part of life, like eating one's vegetables, or having a bowel

movement, or bathing and brushing one's teeth. "If only there were only men," I heard him say not saying.

Paul was tall, as I've already mentioned, and I never called him "dad," or "papa," only "Father," because he required me to do so at an early age. My father, Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Tall Paul, dear Father, had eyes the color of good ale. His hair dark brown, his lean body perfectly proportioned, his strong chin and pronounced jaw...if it weren't for the fullness of his lips, one would call him handsome. But the full and supple quality of his lips gave his whole face the look of something more beautiful than handsome, something boyish, and slightly feminine, striking, for sure, but not classically handsome by the standards of the day.

He finally got what he wanted. His face, his body, succumbed to his constant wish to look more kingly and less princely. The manner by which this affectation realized itself is something he regretted for the rest of his miserable days, and there were, sadly, many days to follow.

It was the beginning of my seventh year of life. Father had just bought a new '52 Chrysler Imperial. It was a wonderful car. The blue paint's shine, and that of the chrome wheels and accents and the nameplate, were all so bright it hurt to look at it. Inside, it seemed as though we were traveling in a moving living room, the plush white leather interior lulling me to sleep on our drives to my grandparents' farm.

It was to be an auspicious year. My father was to be promoted to associate professor, ever-closer to what he secretly-not-so-secretly desired, that of full professor and then, eventually, chair of the history department. His second book, on the past and possible future of communism in the world, particularly Europe and Asia, received respectable reviews, a few even glowing. Of course, I only knew this because my parents spoke of it.

Though, perhaps because I was an only child, perhaps not, I was a voracious reader. Our library provided me with more books than I could ever read. The first floor of our home had cathedral ceilings, and the room in which our library was housed had a sunken floor, and so the library, especially at its threshold, was rather impressive to behold. The shelves reached nearly to the ceiling on three sides of the four-sided library, and these shelves were arranged in alphabetical order, first by subject, then author. My father and mother could never really tell me who arranged all this, perhaps Father's parents; no one really knew for sure.

There was a large, rolling wooden ladder one could use to travail the high places of the library shelves, but being young, and naturally acrophobic, I started reading the books at or near the bottom of the shelves.

Fairytales were my natural inclination, of course, perhaps aided by Mother's bedtime stories, and I took to them like candy. I couldn't get enough of reading about wonderful princesses and crafty sorceresses, and my vivid imagination produced images of craggy, veiny hands with long, long nails holding orbs of crystal or magical power, the hands of a terrible witch or a great wizard, more powerful than castles hewn from solid rock off a cliff, a cliff almost always overlooking the vast and violent sea, the frothy waves crashing white and blue, blue-green on a distant shore, over there, in Europe, where castles still stood, where gold and gilded cathedrals stretched toward the face of heaven, toward dark, velvet, purple and navy firmaments to which the civilized world prayed.

I would lose myself for hours in that library, me behind the big wooden desk, sitting on a dark maroon, stitched, leather chair, sometimes rubbing the metal inscription of the company by which the furniture was made: Jasper.

Most of our neighbors were far older than my parents, and their children were near my parents' age. The exception was our neighbors across the street. They had moved there around the time Father bought the Imperial.

They had a son already in college, but their daughter was of similar age to me. Her name was Grace. I had only met her once before Grace and her family went on a vacation. She had long hair like me, except her hair was brown and chocolaty like my father's, and her eyes were green like a new blade of grass seen through the prism of a drop of water and sunlight.

As I said, it was to be an auspicious year. Then, suddenly, my mother grew ill. She had breast cancer, already metastasizing. I looked at her, in the hospital room, white all around, and watched her quickly fade away, the butterfly envenomed by the hungry spider.

The day before she passed, she had Father bring a small jewelry box she kept in her dresser to the hospital. Grandma and Grandpa sat in the far corner of my mother's hospital room, sad and solemn and mostly silent.

There, my mother's body so thin, I thought she would float away, she whispered to me to open the box.

In it were jewels I'd never seen her wear, of green emeralds and blue sapphires, rings and bracelets of white and yellow gold. Their shine was like that of the Imperial, though brighter, perhaps because of all the white surrounding us.

Slowly, she touched a small, velvet box in the upper-right corner of the jewelry box.

"Open it," she whispered.

Inside was a necklace of platinum and white gold, holding a dark, deep purple gem I'd never seen or heard described before.

“This belonged to your grandmother’s grandmother, who bought it from Italy. Her name was Cateriana Bucelli. She is whom I named you after. She was a brave woman, and she swore that of all her belongings, this necklace, whose gem is of the finest amethyst, would protect and enrich the woman who wore it.” She took a long pause; her shallow breathing seemed excruciating and labored. She mustered a faint laugh. “I’m thinking now I should have worn it. I never even put it on. To leave such beauty boxed away for all these years is a sin.”

By now, Father, and my grandparents, stood surrounding me and the bed in which my dying mother lied. I hadn’t even noticed their presence, so close to me, as I was transfixed by my mother’s words and the breathtaking gifts she now bestowed upon me, most precious to me, the necklace of amethyst.

My mother continued, “I love you all. And Cathy...my Catherine, I love you most of all.” She said she wanted to rest.

I cried because I knew she was in pain. I cried because my grandmother was crying. I cried and did not stop well into the night, Father’s grim expression turning grimmer as the night grew darker, his hand occasionally tapping my shoulder, his way of offering support.

I succumbed to sleep well past midnight, and by morning, Clara Catherine Rossi Moore passed away.

And slowly, and surely, I passed away as well. After my mother’s sudden death, my life, as clean and faceted as the gem I now wear in this dark place, assumed the shape and feel of a priceless jewel: hard, shiny, cold, pointing downward, downward, downward to the earth from which it came.

2:

They buried Mother on a family plot not far from Lake Champlain. It was a cool Saturday afternoon, the sky overcast, dark birds flying overhead, the sun obscured by gray clouds, breaking the sunlight into rays, looking as a painting would of such a scene.

My father, faithless and accursed, knew no religion, and so, naturally, was a Catholic like my mother. We only went to church on special occasions: weddings I was too young to fully remember, Easter Mass, Christmas, and those kinds of things, pagan holidays assimilated into Christianity, old, heathen rites of winter and summer and spirits of earth and air.

I wanted to go to church more often as I got older, not for any affinity for the story of the Christ, but because the church we went to reminded me of what I read in the large, leather, brown and black books, of which, a few rare and precious pages had pictures of castles and churches, with rafters and steeples high and regal. The stained glass at our church, St. Anthony Church, always mesmerized me. The scenes were executed in vibrant and deep reds, blues, purples, greens, and yellows, depicting St. Paul, having his vision restored by Ananius of Damascus, or Jesus with his loaves and fish, or St. Peter ministering at the Pentecost.

Vermont's Catholic history reaches back before the founding of America. Samuel de Champlain, a devout Catholic, from whom Lake Champlain is named after, commented on the many green hills and mountains of Vermont and pronounced them blessed by Jesus. He founded New France and Quebec City, and laid the foundations for exploration, colonization, and proselytizing to the heathen natives and Europeans alike throughout Vermont and what is now Quebec, Canada.

The endowed professorship my father later attained is named after Samuel de Champlain. We do love commemorating dashing men civilizing the earth and everything living on it and in it and of it, don't we?

But these men die all the same, perhaps interned as my mother was on that Saturday two lives ended: a mother, then, now, and forever dead, and her daughter, so shocked by the sharp dagger of pain and loss a mother's death means for any feeling child, the hurt so large and stark that the child had neither the words nor emotional vocabulary to express said shock and pain in any cogent or meaningful way.

Even now, I can hear the priest intoning the antiphon, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." Yes, yes, I can still see the two large men lowering the exquisite, silver casket into the cold, brown ground. I can hear the priest reciting the ancient prayer, created before we knew the earth was round, before we knew the size and scope of the sun, before we made large machines of metal that acquire the air and fly: "Grant this mercy, O Lord, we beseech Thee, to Thy servant departed, that he may not receive in punishment the requital of his deeds who in desire did keep Thy will, and as the true faith here united him to the company of the faithful, so may Thy mercy unite him above to the choirs of angels. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Even then, I wondered why the priest said "he" when referring to the deceased, my dear mother, when she was, always to my knowledge, a woman.

But I could not linger on that question. I was quiet the whole time, as I knew this was not an appropriate place to ask questions. The two large men started to pile the dirt, smelling of something metallic and something sweet, on top of the casket, the silver casket in which my mother, her remains, her simple gold crucifix, her white dress of fine linen, all of what was my mother, was held, is held, forever and ever.

I watched as she sank deeper into the earth from which we all came, the same earth from which this amethyst I now wear was taken, cleaned, faceted, and polished. I watched as the center of my young life, violently wrenched from me, was laid to rest at the bottom of a grave, irretrievable, like a lover's ring lost to the endless, depthless dark of the sea, or an obscure writer's inspired work burned in a sudden fire, the manuscript consumed in a hellish conflagration in which nothing survived.

The repast was attended by many people, though most of their names and faces I have forgotten. I was not allowed to bring Elly this Saturday, the Saturday of my mother's funeral. Father said that it's "time to put away childish things." Ironic, being a lapsed Catholic, and, especially after Mother's death, an ardent atheist, how easily Father could recall Bible verses when it suited his arguments. "There is wisdom in all the holy books," he once said to me. I think if I had to write down the times he actually spoke to me, it would fit on three pieces of paper. Double-spaced.

I didn't attend kindergarten, so as I entered first grade, though ahead of peers in academics, especially reading and writing, I was poorly equipped in social interactions. I would often stay to myself during play time and the like, reading books, of course, wishing I had Elly with me.

My first grade teacher, a kind, plump, young woman, Ms. Del Ray, always tried to get me to play with the other children, but I informed her I was fine where I was. She would sit by me sometimes and have me read to her, and she marveled at both the speed and enthusiasm in which I read.

Things would have gone on like this indefinitely, until Grace arrived a month after school started.

She had a peculiar, gentle, but melancholy way about her. She nearly and almost was an only child, her brother being more than fourteen years older. She and I liked books very much, and at play time, would gather around the classroom's bookshelf and read to each other, sometimes acting out what the other read with the toys around us, sometimes outside, being careful not to sully the books.

We both ate similarly as well: slowly, carefully, making sure not to spill anything or dirty our dresses. Ms. Ray started calling us "the little ladies who lunch," and was amazed at our ability to read, with feeling and accuracy, anything she put before us.

This relationship we developed, between Grace and I, carried over into our lives at each other's homes. We were two little girls in houses far too large for a family of so few people, houses far too large to accumulate any warmth to them, any sense of community. How could they? For these were massive homes, with their miles and miles of hardwood floors and fine oriental rugs, stone fireplaces and chandeliers that sparkled, sparkle still, these crystal constellations depicting old Greek tragedies, of royal virgins gone mad with grief, of queen-mothers enraged with a righteous vengeance, so hot the vengeance turned to hate, burning, burning, burning white and incandescent.

And I have found hate a most useful emotion. It burns in me even now, this hate; it fueled my illustrious life, gave it fire and breath and power, illuminated my eyes, informed my dreams, burned all excesses and weaknesses away, purified my days and nights, consumed me entirely, and finally, yes, finally, left me perfected.

But perfection, I found out too late, is death of a different kind. No less beautiful for its deadness. But perfection cannot have children, or know warmth, or have love mediated through

it. Perfection is the exquisitely silent, dark, and starry-skied expanse of space. Its temperature is absolute zero, absolutely. Perfection is death and we die before it. We aspire to it.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'm recalling the years before my hate, my body, my flesh (sadly, fatefully, a woman's best weapon and tool), assumed a power requisite to the task at hand: conquering, devouring, following the commandment from the Old Testament, in the old ways—for I was like an ancient Jew in the Pentateuch, killing off all the Canaanites. I took to this task, dispatching of my enemies, real and imagined, with the mantra: "leave no eye open to grieve for the dead."

If I believe in God, he is cruel and vengeful; he is merciless and darker than the pitch of the spaces between stars; only perfection knows neglect so cold even light freezes in its presence.

I think I wanted to die a little and a lot. I think I was already and always dead after my mother was put in the ground. My life, in a way, was living out a death.

A living person, yet dead, knows no fear, feels pain but does not recognize it, requires food and water like all living things, but can endure far past the time others would have expired.

A living person, yet dead, is dangerous, indeed. These people are fearless; they do not cower from death or life, and so must be feared. Such a person's power comes from this fact. There are powers greater than these—the powers of the fearless who are feared, but you'd be hard-pressed to enumerate a substantial list thereof.

The price for this fearlessness, and the power attendant to it, is worth a princely sum and more. This dying in the self, to the self, this Pauline death, requires an unspeakable trauma to be endured, survived, and fully experienced by the individual in question. A Jew at Dachau. An Indian at Wounded Knee. A colored child at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham,

Alabama. A woman. A colored woman especially, but a woman will do. A young child witnessing her mother's ending. A young woman's baby murdered from the inside out by a father capable of such a thing. All of these are not the same. But yes, they will do for my story. This is my story, after all.

...My last day of so many lived on this rock circling the unimaginable distances of space.

A meaninglessness? What is a life but eating and sleeping, defecating and bathing, consuming and expelling: carbon dioxide, love, hate, prayer, blasphemy? Evil? Especially this.

Tangential.

I was saying something else. I'm distracted. Apologies. I was saying: this, most assuredly, is my last day of so many lived on this rock circling the unimaginable distances of space...the breathless, eyeless, earless cold of the vacuum. Its void is God. His silence is His judgment, if you believe in such a thing.

I never understood those, particularly the supposed faithful, who fear anything, but especially death. If one believed in a heavenly life everlasting, death would be no more a burden, no more a sadness, than the passing of one day to the next, than the sun and moon in their endless traversing of the diamond-studded sky.

I don't believe believers believe their beliefs. They go through the motions of worship and supplication. They abstain from drinking and smoking, busying themselves with playing half-ascetic, half-not, denying themselves sex or wine, as if these things will ameliorate the great and burning eyes of The Almighty, who, supposedly, knows and sees all things. Surely, if such an entity exists, it would not be concerned with the banal, trivial minutiae of a Christian or Muslim or Jew having an orgasm, or drinking a good martini, juxtaposed with the turning and burning

of galaxies, the explosion of stars annihilating whole planetary systems and any life (sentient?) thereof; war, famine, plague.

Humanity is a miracle of affliction. Humanity is a miracle of affliction, and I'm glad to be rid of it soon and very soon.

The light reflects off my dear mother's amethyst. I finger it now, this gem. At my end, still, its powers are everlasting.

The air here is stifling and will soon go out. The light I saw flicker before has stopped, I think. Perhaps I am damp from blood or some other bodily fluid. I cannot feel the entirety of my body, and do not trust my senses to discern the fullness of my fate. I do perceive pain. Here. There.

I hear a groan; it is not my own.