

**Mothering You
& Fathering Her**

The Bitter Daughter

My father
never says Thank You.

A family fish fry for his 60th:
bronzing jukebox songs and a hotel stay and grandkids in swimsuits
fuzzy on the bottom, fizzy drinks in hand,
steam from the winter water
and made-to-order eggs on the other side of the night.

Result: one photographically documented half-smile.
Exhausted daughter who tried.

A hilltop gathering for his 65th:
noodle soups, crisp salads, pizza for fifteen,
and a custom cake with a wide-mouth bass.
Leaving work early, grandkids packed in the back,
harrowing January roads, cars in the ditch,
but not ours: we arrived, with candles too,
and that fancy party hat I wanted to burn
after he snapped the little string and said,
“Get this damned thing off me.”
His face was red like a cardinal’s back.
The grandkids made the hat their bugle.

Result: we’re only gathering for the descendants now,
these milestones better left unrecognized.

My father
feeds his yard birds dutifully each morning.
Black oil sunflower seed for the showier singers,
yellow millet for the tiny fliers,
kernels for those who forget to
or would rather not
leave during winter anymore: too old, or too well-fed at home.
No thanks there, either;
but under his care, the birds stay.

In his kitchen,
a clock with birds instead of numbers
starts the bluebird song,
chirping mechanically as I make his morning coffee.
“Too weak,” he decides, emptying it down the drain
before grabbing his bird seed bucket,
straightening his hat,
and sliding the glass doors open to leave again.

She Won't Know

I carry the dead bat with a shovel.

My husband, working in Missouri,
my daughter, asleep, her old baby monitor just in range
as I move the bat from driveway to woods.

"Intact?" my husband asks.
"Yes. Probably still warm," I say. "Just fell from the sky."

The woods are slender but useful:
the neighbors drag over dead leaves on tarps,
abrasive and crunchy over the road's asphalt.
The city keeps a pump house behind the ash trees,
pleasantly humming as it cycles water on a schedule:
loud and quiet, loud and quiet. Hasn't broken yet.

I won't tell my daughter about the bat,
the same kind she visits at the zoo
next to the honey gliders in their little huts.
That's part of motherhood: not telling.
Fancy church shoes clipping down the pavement with a dead bat,
or a run-over cat, or the worms she gathered and left too long in the sun:
should have been fishing bait, now just stringy compost.

The next morning, we are smiles and cereal,
wondering what to do with our day.

Lineage

My mother died in her early 50s.
I am careful to say “died” and not “passed away”
because when you kill yourself, language matters.

The first time didn't work.
She asked if the hospital had a bookstore, or a library,
something to do, something to read, please,
while I watched Oprah between vital assessments.

The second time took.
I received her old earrings,
an odd photograph of myself that printed poorly
(don't know why she saved it; can't ask now),
and a snow globe that works if you shake it hard enough.
I like this last trinket, because she lived in the desert.

But all of this only reminds me
that I never received anything after my grandmother died.
So in love with her, I would have accepted
anything at all: a blanket from the linen closet,
a souvenir magnet from the fridge, a bent fork from the drawer.
But from her, I just have the last memories her daughter gave me.

Josephine's Garden

We bought a delicate sign
for my daughter that spring.
Josephine's Garden it says, a metal oval on a stick,
butterflies behind the letters.

In her garden
poppies bloom, low to the ground for a child's eye,
and irises too, taller than her ("taller than me!" she sings).

And while the tenderly collected rocks sleep,
twigs stuck in the ground fall down,
bits from her lunch decay for the birds,
and puddles from her watering can hands fill again,
I pose her for another photo, filed away by year.

After the flash
her eyes search for more cherry tomatoes—
her favorite, eaten off the vine, not even washed;
in the organic assault of Perfect Mom, I have made peace here.

In the corner
a farmer's market is underway: pumpkins double in size,
giant looping vines tickle their striped watermelon neighbors,
looking like summer footballs
getting ready for fall kick-off.

From age one to two, three to four, five to six,
I watched her in the weeded rows;
she's finally taller than those flowers we first planted.
Josephine snaps open too-small peas,
pulls up tiny carrots too early
and says: "Everything is still growing in my garden."
And I am water, sun, and heat,
thinking about my next child:
a small turnip growing within.

Deep Sea Fishing

My line of pimples
is shaped like a Caribbean island chain.
The Bahamas maybe,
where we sail next to stingrays slapping our boat.
"Life is precious," I say.
"Sure is easy to die," he says.
The stingrays head north
and we thread our poles.

It's winter back home,
where the cardinals and bats play,
my snow globe re-dusts unshaken
and the perennial bulbs are hard underground.

Down here, my family is old enough for a boat ride now,
and this salty trip erodes many pains.

But in the ocean spray, I'm months away,
maybe days,
from someone realizing I'm a fraud.
Faker wife, infertile mom,
dramatic daughter
who can't even cast my line far enough in calm waters.
But I carry on with all of these,
because pretending, trying, is still doing.

We have two daughters:
one looks like me, one looks like him.

And if they look up to me
then I'm authentic
and forgiven
enough.