

Poems as Memoir, # 1

Nana sits in paisley
Or calico,
With a wide, empty lap;
Our household's reigning widow monarch.
She is a living sepulcher,
Her private griefs indiscernable.
Even the linens and curtains are weighted down.
A distinct odor of camphor permeates
This space—it is a vault.
Closets store unopened gifts, homeopathic supplies.
To solace her, a radio emits the disembodied voice
Of Herbert Armstrong.
Each evening, without success, I beg this
Beloved enigma of mine to come downstairs.
Years later, I read of camphor's properties in an 1800 text—
“the specific remedy at the commencement of cholera,”
But it doesn't help, her chair is still vacant during supper.

Ghost Mother #2

My memory of Mom is random and fleeting, a series of action poses,
And the results of her labor.

I see these images in my mind's eye:

Mom is sitting at the sewing machine, rearranging layers of taffeta,
Or gabardine, at intervals;
The motor protesting, Brr—brr--brr--.
Or she is sewing by hand, using meticulous tiny stitches.

When a client stands in front of our full-length mirror,
Mom sits cross-legged on the floor,
Holding straight pins between her teeth,
Then extracts several in turn, to mark the skirt's length.

Scraps of notes are pinned to the finished work,
In case she wasn't home when the client came for it.
Mrs. Shotter \$5.00 The item is hung on a coat hanger
And placed on the rod over the doorway to Nana's sitting room.

I see her squatting on the ground near the backdoor.
She is rinsing clumps of dirt off freshly picked vegetables
With the garden hose.

I see trays and trays of Christmas cookies;
Date pinwheels, candy canes made with almond favored dough,
And cherry winks, all to be wrapped, placed in tins
And delivered to friends and co-workers.

I see a dress that she sewed for me. Its white pinafore was appliqued
With figures cut from the dress material; little girls, umbrellas, kitty-cats.
I wore it to school on class picture day.

Mom is dashing off to a committee meeting, notebook on one arm,
A brief kiss, the scent of Jean Nate cologne,
Bright red lipstick.

Occasionally, the action grinds to a halt; an inevitable three-day migraine.
Prone in bed, window shades pulled,
Tea and toast. Weight drops below her usual ninety-eight pounds.
A pall obstructs my spirit.

Oh! Now she's talking on the phone to Katherine, her best friend.
She's perched on the low desk next to the porch window with her feet on the chair.
[The desk is really a small closet built into the corner, to store boots and odd stuff.
Two shelves above it hold knick-knacks, mom's extra pins, and so forth.]

I can't get her attention. The conversation goes on and on. Finally, they hang up.
Now Mom is at the kitchen table drinking coffee, smoking, and making
The grocery list or paying bills.
Normalcy and (temporary) peace reign.

My mother's name was Gladys.

I am a chameleon, and had always seen myself
Quietly observing others on the playground
During middle school—
I stared intently at those on swings and
Ball courts and fingered the chain link fence.

I am a chameleon, changing from vivid
Green to peat moss brown before
I give away my weaknesses—
But I'm not frightened, it is
The chemistry of my skin, you know.

I am a chameleon, blending into
The mood of present company,
Chiseling off the edges of my verbs
And glances,
Locking up my analyses and tangled observations.

Forgive me, I lied earlier.
I do have a fear—of being confined
Permanently, in a place made safe
With Styrofoam and plastic
'silverware' ...

“The Right Way” #4

“There’s the right way to do something, and there’s Fern’s way,” told

Repeatedly to the child

Who absorbed and analyzed all incoming data.

The mother’s statement followed the child—

Harassed and haunted her all her life.

Mom did not understand

The unending questions, the voracious love of books,

how a child could be reduced to sobs with a glance,

and countless other idiosyncrasies.

But it was not Mom’s fault;

Counseling or Ritalin were not available then,

And it was not known that neurons and synapses run on highways in the brain.

The ways to “do something” must include an infinite number of nuances;

With aplomb, with vengeance, with trepidation,

Stealthily, indolently, with ecstatic joy

Or while listening to Mozart—or to the Bee Gees.

That is what I *would* have said to Mom.

For years, others continued Mom’s litany with different phrases—

“Fern, you are *too ...much, analytical, sensitive, literal...*”

And now, a kaleidoscope of images still swirls around in her mind

Especially at first light of day,

And time itself is of a different nature than to most.

