

Late Summer, 1979

I'd follow her here and there.

If we needed to go somewhere by automobile or city bus,
my mother tagged along.

[break]

One summer in the late fifties Aunt Ginny surprised us,
taking the muggy, grueling train trip
from her home in Kansas City to southern California.

I shivered with excitement the night she arrived—
my father clutching her tattered brown suitcase,
standing by her tall, lanky side.

I stayed up late to greet her.

To show her the tiny meowing kitten harbored in my lap.

Equally as vivid, I recall her confused stare and hard,
curious expression weeks later

as I cried and cried learning Trudy—

Aunt Ginny's and my frisky, playful companion,
had succumb to distemper.

Color-splotched, tumbling Trudy was dead.

Gone.

[break]

Being her seven-year-old niece,

I thought it unusual

that Aunt Ginny didn't understand my pain.

[break]

In her late teens she walked into upscale department stores,
placed items on lay-a-way,
only to forget what she'd done.

In her early twenties,
she was diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic.

[break]

Aunt Ginny was a chain smoker.
Carried on lively, often-hostile, conversations with herself
and would sneak off on walks when no one was watching.
It wasn't unusual for her to light a cigarette,
inhale and drop it to the sidewalk,
laughing as she twisted its remains with her round-toed flat.
A stranger telephoned
telling us he'd found her wandering in his neighborhood.
She'd walked eleven blocks before tiring.
When approached,
rummaging through her pocketbook,
she produced a crumpled scrap of paper:
her brother's telephone number.

[break]

My most affecting memory of Aunt Ginny's visit
is walking into our living room
finding my parents sitting together on the couch,
my dad crying,
wiping away tears with a hand towel.
He'd asked Aunt Ginny about leaving,

as she'd been with us over a month.

I'll be leaving soon, she'd said.

As soon as I've been here two weeks.

[break]

Virginia Ann Brewer passed away in a mental institution
late summer, 1979.

I shudder to think what her days entailed:

Pain on a scale of one to ten.

Archaic treatments.

Loneliness. Boredom.

[break]

Four months pregnant at the time
my stomach continued its churning,
while my heart soared.

Hoping for a boy,

I'd chosen the name Charles Skye,
intent on calling him by his middle name—
indicative of my desire for a sensitive soul,
a free spirit.

Aware of my baby's flutters and movements,
preoccupied, preparing for a new chapter in my life,
I rarely held thoughts of Aunt Ginny—
with her cartons of cigarettes,
sunken cheeks, dark wispy hair, and tall too-thin figure.

Until... late summer, 1979.

[break]

Today my hunch, spiritual affinities,

lead me to believe Aunt Ginny is nearby.

Smoking. Watching. Smiling.

Delighted with her new family:

her great-nephew, Skye.

Great-great niece and great-great nephew—

Skye's young, active and talented children.

[break]

Free from confusion and pain,

she watches in peace.

