

## **WHERE DOES YOUR ANGER COME FROM?**

I am five years old.  
My brother is eight.  
He was mean to me a minute ago.  
I am crying loudly in the upstairs hallway.  
Daddy comes out of the bedroom wild with anger.  
My brother seems to fly as Daddy throws him by the shoulders into the galley  
style bathroom.  
I can see his little crying face  
with the curly light brown locks framing it,  
looking at me,  
knees burrowed into the green carpet.  
Daddy has a rolled up newspaper,  
gripped in his right hand.  
His fury hisses through gritted teeth  
and seems to steer his arm  
as it whooshes down on my brother's shoulders.  
This feeling of guilt will stay here,  
burned in me like the anger of Daddy's temper.  
I am five years old.

**PAMELA BROWN**

It's 1982 I think,  
in the kitchen with the yellow and beige linoleum.  
Sun comes through the window  
over the double sink.

You are smiling,  
thick sandy brown hair in a short-feathered bob  
and large framed glasses.

You pick me up and set me on the counter  
while you finish the dishes,  
humming the Pink Panther theme song  
in ba-doop-a-doos.

This scene is forever locked in my mind.

I remember nothing else about you,  
except that you died before you could babysit again,  
murdered at the festival downtown,  
where my first grade class sang It's a Small World  
and others drank under the beer tent  
in shoulder-to-shoulder crowds,  
getting rowdy into the night.

You were found behind a church the next day  
by some children collecting bottles,  
(schoolmates of my siblings and I)  
strangled by your shirt string,  
and undressed from the waist down.

I didn't know what any of this meant,  
but my mother told me  
if I was ever being attacked by a man,  
to yell "fire" instead of "rape,"  
because someone would be more likely to help.

## **I BEGAN TO NOTICE**

I began to notice  
the expression on the faces of cute boys  
when I drank as fast as they did,  
or faster.

My other special power  
that made the abyss under my clavicles feel less vast  
and freed me from my brother's shadow,  
was using my body to speak,  
with all of its unexplored new curves.

I chased that object-of-their-affection dragon for decades.

I was not awful, but I was not great.  
Mediocre, unremarkable.  
Not the prettiest,  
not the smartest,  
not the most talented at anything,  
except awkwardly earning the attention  
of someone interesting every now and then.

I was my smart and responsible sister's little sister  
my edgy but likable brother's little sister.  
Then I was mysterious Billy's girlfriend.  
Until I was someone else's girlfriend,  
or the girl who was anybody's who wanted her,  
keeping up and going along  
as my back pocket skill.

I held a lifetime of solid C averages,  
an endless string of customer service jobs,  
where hangovers went unnoticed  
as long as you arrived on time  
and said it with a smile.

I began to notice years later,  
when I became a wife for the first time,  
that I didn't know who I was  
and the jig was up.

*(continued)*

*(I BEGAN TO NOTICE, continued)*

Except I did know her,  
I just didn't want to.  
Ignoring my angry and volatile self was easier.  
Playing along with what everyone preferred,  
keeping attention diverted  
from such an undesirable girl.

## **DEAD END**

We hid our faces in barstools  
until we forgot how to talk to each other.  
Our mouths moved, our empty eyes burned.  
We didn't know what we'd done,  
but we knew it made us unhappy.

You rode on the back of my shame  
pointing the blame at me,  
telling the story as you knew it,  
making us both into clichés.

At the bottom of the bottle,  
we usually stopped liking each other  
but you made me choose between sobriety and you  
and I chose you.  
Because getting sober  
while you told me I was awful  
was too hard  
so I decided that being awful and drunk  
was the better choice.

I spent some time  
remembering when we lived on Love Street.  
It was an ache that pulled away my rind in strips.  
I hemorrhaged until I had felt so much  
I felt nothing

It's not that I wish ill will on you now  
It's that I don't wish anything, good or bad.

## **CANCER**

I don't remember  
much of anything  
before the ground opened below us,  
releasing everything stable  
from beneath our feet.

All I could hear  
above all the background noise  
was the word CANCER,  
no matter what anyone was saying.

What could you hear?  
Your worst fear,  
realizing itself  
as actual cells in your body.

The world become  
really big  
and really small  
all at once.

Fluorescent lights  
white lab coats,  
a port of entry  
into your chest,  
IGGs, WBCs, light chains -  
numbers and letters spinning a code  
that I wanted so badly to break.

I wanted you not to break.  
I wanted us not to break.

But no partnership is perfection  
even without cancer.  
Every frustrated sigh,  
or snapped response,  
ended in a deep and mournful guilt  
and a silent prayer  
to not get angry

to do better

because there was no time  
for so many mistakes  
or unpacking of baggage

I just needed to  
love you  
as hard as I could.