

The Way it Was

My first cousin Margaret Ann was my age
but she told me she was a year older.
Since she was taller I believed her
and she got to say everything we did.

One Saturday morning on our back porch
she played barber and cut my bangs 'til they were gone.
My mama was furious at me while
Margaret Ann cleaned her fingernails with the scissors.

My daddy, out fishing all morning, brought home a mess of catfish
and a baby alligator. He called us over to see. The alligator was skinny,
brown, maybe six inches long, running back and forth between the boat seats
through the shallow brown water in the bottom of the boat.

While my father was cleaning fish, Margaret Ann went inside,
got a spoon, came back out and beat the baby alligator to death.
I watched and never said a word. Finally, she dropped the spoon and
walked away, the baby alligator twitching 'til it stopped.

After she went home my mother and father sat drinking coffee
at the kitchen table. They said, "That girl is wild how can they stand her?"
I listened with my head propped in my hand,
my fingers feeling the short stubble.

I was short and fat and did everything right
but oh how I wished
I was tall and skinny and brave
like Margaret Ann.

Summer Sundays

My father was
a good looking man
quiet, smart, maybe shy

After church on Sunday
nights he would stand
outside with the men

They would smoke and talk
and rattle the change
in their pockets

He would always stand
one step back
I never heard him say a word

But he did smoke
and rattle the change
in his pockets

Moment

The summer I was five
an older cousin, marrying the next day
came to our house with that
tall skinny boy,
all my aunts and uncles, my cousins

My daddy and my uncles set up
hay bales and card tables, then
sat and smoked taking turns
cranking the ice cream
while we brought out chairs from the house.

My mother and my aunts, busy with red and white
checked tablecloths, candles in jars
forks and spoons and sugar, paper plates, iced tea
fried chicken, potato salad, pickles, white bread,
said make yourself useful ,stop asking questions, go play

Long into the night, candles burned down,
food put away, the grown-ups sat
telling stories, laughing,
their heads lost in the darkness
save their burning cigarettes
their words surrounding us
anchored us
home.

We lay on a blanket on our backs
Kenneth, Margaret Ann, me, staring into the night sky.
Kenneth, tall bony older, paid me no mind
but lying in the darkness said
Do you think there are people out there?
Living on other planets?

My mind in that moment
reached far beyond my backyard
leapt up to the stars
to a place, a people
(Is there a girl like me?)
I longed to know.

3:00 A.M.

At night behind closed eyes
my cat creeps out.
She is wild.

Anxious, she scales
up the blinds, across the ceiling,
belly flat, toes sucking, she hangs on,
licks the light fixture,
jumps across the room, lands on the mirror,
slides down, nails scraping.

Restless, she wanders
into every corner, explores my closet,
sniffs old smells, comes up empty.
Ears pricked, eyes wide,
she dashes under the bed
and scrambles with dust balls.

Weary, she slinks
back in bed, back inside my head
and stretches out, but it is not a gentle sleep.
She twitches and chases
ashes from the cold fire
all night long.

When it Happens You Know It

The giant sleeps, flame red hair damp,
clustered about her face, her skin
pale and slack with peaceful sleep,
her palms open, accepting air and dreams
through fingertips that do not touch.

I'd thought my house was strong and secure.
I was pleased enough with the structure
and felt sure it would last.
But the earthquake shook the foundation
and books and dishes fell to the floor.
In my busyness to straighten and bring
about order, I did not notice her eyes flutter.

She woke, eyes bright and piercing,
hair on end, her fingers touching daylight
and feeling the burn. She startles me.
She startles herself. I watch in amazement
as she turns and stretches and stands.
With no effort she makes of my house a pile of sticks,
much like a dollhouse in the hands of a rough and clumsy child.
She meant no harm. She only woke and moved about.

This house, however, could not contain her.
For her to stand was to destroy all I had built.
I see her clearly now. And I see she has
no intention of living on air and dreams.
She seeks nourishment not found in this small place.

She smiles a knowing smile, and I realize
she will have room to roam and food that demands chewing,
I know she will hold people close to her.
I am tempted to hide in a closet, but she grabs my hand
and roars with laughter, dragging me along.
I go, my questions, hesitations, swarming like gnats.