

Epitaph

Two weeks left of dying,
I overheard mom whispering to the cousins,
 Having a gay daughter could keep me from heaven.

Eyes so sunken from morphine, half open,
her pupils lichen-covered headstones.
 I didn't read *Loving Mother*,

I saw sky, cloudwork reconfiguring death
as cumulous beasts of parent and child,
 a sun glaring as an interrogation bulb,

a lawn of tiny faceless children, their murmur
either *hope* or *help*. Rummaging
 to find an answer approximating tenderness,

Dad's tracing his fingers across her
 face illuminating grave memory.

I imagine he tired of taking out the trash,
of the bloody chuck pads,
of asking my cousin to buy more sheets,
of sleepless nights listening to her labored breath,
of the phone,
of updating,
of leaving me voicemails,
of having family, friends in and out all hours,
instead he tells me,
 you know she loved you the best that she could.

This bridge is not constructed for the crossing.

Freed to float
for days,
for the rasp,
for the release
 into light.

Now, we know when
there are white candles burning
next to white candles, they're
silent cries of light, memory
flickers, a burning the unanswered need
in churches, at ceremonies.

Dad tells me he remembers

a weak smile he hopes
was for him, but can accept
it was for her Maker.

I am the dyke daughter flying
in late with the only request I'll ever fulfill,
a poem that doesn't make her look like a bad mom:

We saw your heart
~~As a beacon, a door~~
Held open ~~for the singing,~~
We watched,
Felt our ~~earth stop for deep breaths~~
~~As we poured our purest love~~
In the grip of your hand,
The seconds mapped ~~a way home held~~
~~Open by stars.~~

You ~~were~~ less yourself
~~Than a part of~~ everything
Bound ~~in the light,~~
Ripening like silence in each ~~white second,~~
A ripple like a sheet settling over your waning.

~~You were the moon~~
~~To yours and those watching~~
~~From the sand, from the waves.~~
Reminding ~~our shadows to dance.~~

~~We touch the moon~~
Caught ~~up in the waves.~~
All we can do is wait ~~for~~
~~The opening...~~

I arrive as Vera Wang,
platinum cross,
2-inch heels,
MAC makeup,
all eyes on the absence—
no ring on my left hand.

Standing next to her casket looking out on
a congregation offering to acknowledge
a life I could not even in drag.

Death and life both crave
clarity, light. Obituary
and poetry spark and carry

Excerpt from *Mercy: Mother, Marriage, and Other Natural Disasters*

until we run out
of wax and wick.

Grenade

Cervical cancer has no grace, makes no apologies.

Mom had never called for my help before.

Lisa, there's a big ol' thing coming out of me down there.

She needed me to see the clot—
a pomegranate, a rotten baby, a grenade.

Just get it out of me.

She'd been hemorrhaging
the family's whole visit.

Just get it out of me.

Trembling, knowing
I could be what killed her,
ended all of this.

Knowing, if I were to touch her there,
a swarm of bees would kick up off
bite-ridden fruit
in her father's backyard.

Just get it out of me.

I tried, twisted
right, left
ripping a bit,
my hand cradling
the warmth, the weight.

I could not hold. Fix it, fix anything.
I called Dad. He called hospice.

I rattled out two Vicodin, Lorazepam—
her razzle dazzles—
a blue and white swallow, lifting to the sky.

I can't take this many.

Her blood crusting my finger nails,
she worried I'd given her too many pills.

Now, I nurse the ghosts

with my own liftings,

pluck seeds and savor
the taste of stain

believing her weeks shortened to days
in my adopted daughter hands.

Sweet'n Low

Crackle Barrel, Gas City, IN 2003

I met her half way between
our cities, waiting with
a wooden angel holding a butterfly—
a gift for Mother's Day. We sat awkward.
Disagreed on what movie I saw first,
she swore Cinderella.
I took you, we sat in front.

Two pink packets, sides torn, tossed,
granulated saccharin—
It was Bambi. I went with Dad, downtown, I was 5.
a little white rapid waterfall into
the frosty glass, into
translucent brown, I'm thinking of baby deer,
the ice tea spoon swirl, clink, swirl, clink,
faster—swink swink,
Sweet'N Low tornado slurry.

*My nickname in summer league was Thumper,
because I stepped on the baby rabbit warming up, mom.*

The fake sugar falls to the glass floor.

I was lost with you, Lis.

*Cousin Vickie reads, writes, she would
have been a better mom for you.*

Mercy

If you ask me in person, I'll say I'm glad my mom is dead.
But when I dream, I long for her grimace.
I want her mouth
 open tonsil-big shouting—
a window in the fuddle of grief.
But, I want her
to shout through the broken
glass fist-shattered by my 15-year-old
 dyke-not-Her-daughter severed tendons.
I want her
to shout through her family's
 Baptist *Yor-goin-to-hell* condemnations.
To shout through her head-
 shaken-side-to-side *NO, Lisa*.
I want to hear spittle,
 slobber flying as fists
I want her pounding glass
with urgency
 like the dream is filling with water.
I want her
 desperate even if just to save herself.
I really want to know, can you
 hear the sound of a daughter's hands
 on her mother's throat?
Can you hear
 the mother say, *You are My baby, always will be*
Or do you
 hear her say *No daughter Of Mine...*
Do you leave it unexamined?
Can you see us now?
 Without pry or pound, I need things from her mouth.
But, no one can hear I'm sorry
 before our mouths fill with water
 and become just warble and bubbles.

Catharsis

Snapped apertures, struck faces, strained.
Cakes for ages, Christmas tree poses,
the big gift held up like grandpa's big Bass.

Each one lighter-lit and set
to embers. The catch--
a collapse like her casket
calla lilies, one slow week of wilting,
the finality of *nothing we can do* cancer—

a hot burn, a quick-tempered fuse
quietly releasing ultramarine, cyan, family history—
little hisses caving.

Each flavescent, saffron-tipped birthday candle waiting
for its *never tell* wish—
take time, but remember
the quick, amnesiac ease of flames.

Try to name the colors in fire
like there's a spell:
 carmine, cinnabar,
 sienna, rust.

Repeat:
Mother, I raze to salvage you.

Craning to the stars, watch
ashes bluster, blow ancestral white
kisses to the wind.
Wait agape—
a bundled child catching her first flakes.