

Daughter Poem

Sometimes I see her pressing her palms
against a windowpane in a house that is real

the way a house in a dream is real
until you start to describe it and all you can say is:

it was this house, only it wasn't. It's winter
and she likes to feel the cold entering her body.

Or it's summer and it's heat she's after.
She wasn't born, so she can't die.

Sometimes there is a window but no girl,
and I am the one walking towards it.

Sometimes I see her peering in—
forehead against the screen of our back door—

or running ahead of me on a path that is real
the way a path in a dream is real, saying:

this way, this way.

Published in New Ohio Review, Fall 2020

My Mother Is a Peaceful Ghost

In my dreams my mother keeps walking out of the kitchen singing
You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.

She never sings past the first verse.

Last night, I dreamed I was back at the house—
every light on when I arrived. My mother, forgetting

she was dead, smiled, said she was fine, everything
was fine. At family gatherings—weddings, baptisms—

my mother would look around, sort of stunned,
and say: *There're so many of you!* As if

we'd arrived from some place other than her
own body, a country foreign to her. My mother

is no longer flesh or breath. She's not a *thing*
anymore. Is she with God?

Some days I believe, some days I don't.
Centuries ago, in a church in Europe,

someone carved *God Help Us* into a pew.
Plague years. Sometimes my god is so big,

I wonder what's the use. Divinity
diluted into nothingness. My mother

tried to stop drinking. *I stopped*, she told me once.
Like you'd stop a dryer or a washing machine.

We were standing in the Blackwater Falls gift shop
looking at coffee mugs printed with maps.

West Virginia on one side, waterfalls on the other.
One mug had a gold star to mark the visitor center.

You Are Here, on a travel mug. Here and
not here. How do you name what isn't here?

She tried to stop. And didn't.

Welcome

Flipping the remote, I keep landing
on the hotel's Welcome Channel.

Hello, a woman says. White woman,
pretty smile. *May I have a minute of your time?*

Be as alert as you are at home, she says.
Pretty woman, concerned for my safety.

She keeps walking towards me—there,
behind everything else. Like fear behind the eyes.

I keep flipping, taking in the news of the week.
People are protesting in the streets:

This Pussy Fights Back. No Ban, No Wall.
Never invite strangers into your room.

Pretty smile, pretty woman. As pretty
as my mother was when she was alive.

Pretty as she was in my dream. *Be alert*,
the woman says. *As alert as you are at home.*

I never knew, on Tuesdays, what she'd look like—
my mother, who drove to the Del Mar College

of Hair Design to get dolled up cheap
by a stranger. Sometimes, large, loopy curls.

Other times, tight and small—tucked in
like something sleeping. *Use the viewport*,

the woman says, *if someone knocks on your door.*
Hepburn-chestnut one week to a sassy blonde

the next. In the dream, she is reading
from my book. She looks happy.

Keep the doors and windows locked,
the woman says. In five pages,

my mother will be dead. First, the bottles
hidden in bookcases throughout

the house. Then, the heart wing. *Locked*,
the woman says, *at all times.* My mother

glances up. She is reading in the voice she used
for *Souder* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

She reads as if the woman she is
will not die; as if the woman who dies

will not be her. As if she is not even *there*.
Like when she learned about my attempts—

aspirin, then the knife, my hand like Abraham's
over Isaac. *Nice story*, my mother said.

We had learned to slip out of ourselves.
To squeeze our consciousness through a hole

the size of a dime. We were small inside
our bodies. My body is sin, she told me once.

Be alert, the woman says. *As alert*
as you are at home. *Nice story*, she said.

Published in Ninth Letter, Summer 2019

Ars Poetica

My mother is saying something I still can't hear.

And I want to believe there is a door.

Sometimes I dream I am being led through darkness.

And I wouldn't call her death "natural."

So many rooms were closed off before we knew they were there.

And I was the one no one believed.

And my father still insists her liver was fine.

It was her heart, he says, just her heart.

Published in Bellevue Literary Review, Spring 2018

Interview

Tell me about yourself.

My mother is dead.
I write poems about her.
Sometimes it feels like she is alive.
It's a game we play.
I play. She watches.
Always, she is watching.

What was she like?

She was beautiful.

What else?

She was my mother.

And?

She sang to us.
She took us shoe shopping at Gately's on 53rd.
She drove a blue Karmann Ghia.
She had her hair done every Tuesday.
She helped people. Out there,
in the world, she helped people.

And?

At night, she disappeared.
She was in the house,
she was not in the house.
She looked past everything that was in front of her.

What was she looking for?

I don't know.

Did it scare you, this looking?

It scared me. It didn't scare me.

Which answer is true?

Yes, it scared me.

Commemoration

i. Christmas Pageant

At twelve, I played Mary
in a community Christmas pageant.
I saw you at the service, people said.
I saw you with your baby,
riding your donkey. A real donkey,
led by some boy. Older boy.
Fourteen at least. I don't remember
his name or if I even knew it
at the time. Just that I couldn't look at him.
Couldn't look straight at him
without blushing and lowering my eyes.
Everyone said I made a great Mary.
That I did a great job being
the one God descended upon. No,
not descended upon. Entered.
That I did a great job being the one
God entered. And who
afterwards called it holy.

ii. Christmas Pageant Revisited

The boy is important, the visiting poet said.
Immensely important. The center of the poem,
he said. Her desire for him is the center of the poem,
the *dramatic* center. Her desire for him is
what this poem is about. This much is clear:
She *desires* him. The girl riding a donkey
desires him, the boy, the dramatic center.
You need to build him up more,
he continued. Give him a name, good looks,
maybe a touch of acne. Help us to see him,
to see the real center of this poem.
To see *into* the center; to see inside her
desire. Help us to get inside—
inside the blushing and the lowering.
Tell us how blue his eyes are, how dark his hair,
how straight and perfect his
nose. We need to *see* him. The center
of her desire. Unless, of course, you are striving
(*striving!*) to create an aura of mystery—
an *illusion* of mystery—like you would
if you were talking about, say, God.

First Memory

I remember the sidewalk.
The way it narrowed, the way

my father, years later, taught me
how to draw a road.

Wider at the bottom, narrower
as I moved up the page, the lines

getting closer and closer,
never meeting. How long it was,

cutting straight down the middle
of their yard, narrowing

as I looked down it towards
the house, towards the stroller.

*Never would have happened
if she'd stayed home, people said.*

The lines getting closer and closer,
never meeting.

(She, being the mother. It was the seventies.)
I remember the sidewalk.

Not the sound of the phone
that must have rung,

must have been answered.
The lines getting closer and closer.

Not running with my mother
through our yard, through the alley

that separated our yard
from theirs. Me on one edge,

Katherine on the other—both of us
fixed into position.

The sidewalk, not the look
on the housekeeper's face,

not the body, inert, inside
the stroller.

To Say Something Is Alive Is Not Enough

Because everything is in motion:
bone, ivory, shell. And blood

doesn't hold on to anything
but itself. Because there are worlds

within worlds—geometries
of ant and whale, girl and boy.

And some infinities are larger
than other infinities. Because iron filings

can reveal invisible lines of force.
And my mother's last words were:

help me. Because my father loved
Lincoln's general—the one who drinks

and still wins the War—and the past
is a fine skin that does not protect.

And I did not know that loss could be
so ordinary: my mother reaching

into a cupboard for a glass, saying
take something, anything.

And I don't know if memory
is a place or a map of the place.

Only that I did not come this time
to find her. And I never did ask

what war.

Pretty Moon

Pretty moon, everyone said.
Before the noise, before

the fire. Two cars
and the cornfields idle

on either side. Like the eggs
of monkfish, emerging

a million at a time, knitted
into a gauzy shroud,

forty feet long, buoyant,
built for dispersal—the veil

between us and them,
thin. My cousin,

beautiful at sixteen,
dead at seventeen.

Pretty, pretty moon.
And me, at five, mouth open

not to a scream or even
to a word. Just taking in air,

quietly as a spider
entering a room.

The Lies that Save Us

Driving through Georgia,
we lie like Abraham.
Are you sisters?, people ask.
Yes, we answer. *Twins, even.*
Though we are dressed similarly
in broad-brimmed hats,
long-sleeved shirts and tan pants
tucked into thick white socks
(it being tick season and all)—
we look nothing alike.
Thought so, people say,
as if they have figured out
some secret code. We smile back,
knowing the power of things unseen:
atoms, quarks, and auras
and all the love that lies between.
Kissing energy, we call it.
But all they can see is
something.

– *Published in Bridges: A Jewish Feminist Journal, V. 12, N. 2, 2007*

Intersection

Your freezer had died—the melted blood of raw,
damp meat, everywhere on the kitchen floor.
Bright and contagious across flat brown tiles.
Father was ten time zones away, studying
the ancient gods of ancient Greece; and we were
stopped at a light two blocks from Sears.
It was there I let form in my mouth
one bated word after another to utter the question—
Have you ever thought you might be...—
that hung in the cramped space between us.
(Father's first words: *Maybe your Mother is, too,*
when I came out.)

It wasn't an option, you said.
Your head never turning, both of us looking straight
into the lucid circle of red that, in that moment,
provided all the direction we cared for.
What more could we say
about a revelation carrying the whole sinewy weight
of non-being. The thousands of ways you'd said no—
deferred, followed and agreed—making yourself smaller
and smaller, a god of old clay, buried
and powerless. But for the tiny part that broke out,
sneaked out sly: The resounding Yes
of your seventh conception, as if I birthed you.

– *Published in Sinister Wisdom, Summer 2012*

Holy Week

Laid-up in the heart wing because your valves
weren't right, you couldn't get to your jars
hidden in bookcases throughout the house.

I feel fine, you'd say, every time I called, going on
about the terrible smells and noises and strangers' proddings.
I loved your being there. That whole week,

I loved. That whole week, a clean bright patch
stuck to the stink and slur and soil of every week before.
Several times a day I called, to hear the clearness in

your voice. As if I could store it up somehow, capture it,
go back to it, again and again. To that week,
that one week, when you came back.

– *Published in Poems & Plays, V. 15, 2008*

Wedding

As if the past were present completely
in the laden air of that June day, molded
by the stone walls of the sanctuary,

I walked, as my mother had taught me,
down the aisle, my body
pressed into taut, pallid lace, her own.

Even the tightly folded note my mother
slipped to my bridesmaid to tell her
she was holding her flowers wrong

was a summons from the past
to get things right. And the look I gave
my maid of honor, straight into her eyes

during the spoken vows, was a calling forth,
a calling out. Grandmother, mother,
daughter—there in that moment of keeping

and quiet, quiet breaking. And the Gospel—
slinking in by the preacher—an appeal
to rightnesses of the past, as I said “I do”

with almost every cell and, in the process,
began the long and tight-lipped death
of my mother, who taught me how.

– *Published in Southern Women’s Review, Volume 4, Issue 4, January 2011*

This is Praying

For C., a resident at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution

I hear a voice speaking
about a bird dragging its dark universe
of feathers across our yard,

and I realize it must be me
telling the boy how I carried its body
beyond the range of our dogs.

One eye, round as a coin,
fixing fear upon me, the other,
half shut. How the bird hauled

its body back into our yard,
dying with a will I could only
admire. Telling the boy

just to tell him *something*.
I can barely see his face
through the slot, eight inches

from the bottom of the door.
Pie-hole, they call it. I know
he cannot be cured of his crime.

But I can't help myself—
this language my body speaks
as I crouch, palms, knees

pressed against the prison floor.
Am I the bird?, the boy asks.
He is nineteen. He has an aunt,

a mother, both illiterate, both
a hundred miles away. No one knows why
they have stopped visiting.

I imagine his body, each Sunday,
learning again of their absence.
I imagine his organs, his bones

liquefying inside of his skin.
I imagine his eyes staring out
from his own gathered flesh.

It is three days before Christmas
and I have ten minutes to spread
something like joy. I think

of Vermeer, the woman in blue,
refusing to obey the physics
of light. I do not even know

the source of my own voice.
Am I the bird? There is a window
beyond the canvas but Vermeer

thinks a shadow will be
distracting. I tell him—the boy—
about a dream I'd had.

How my mind had been
like a living thing nailed down,
trembling with what ifs

and how comes. And then
these words: *I hear you,*
I hear you breathing. A sound

coming from within
and beyond. Not a voice, exactly.
More like a gentle pressing

of heat, the perfect distance
from flame, settling me immediately
into sleep. And now this voice

telling him I hear him,
I hear him breathing, telling him:
it is a beautiful sound.

Serving Time

For J., a resident at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution

Think fairy-fly, think
small wasp digging with her legs

through a water's skin.
Think wings, think fringed

and beautiful. Think
of the thing done

by a boy, that cannot be
undone. Think swim,

think down, think
of the paddles, which are really

wings, which are really
beautiful. And the thing done

by the boy that cannot be
undone. Think of the eggs

she is looking for: the eggs
of the water beetle into which

she will insert her own.
Think of the boy, think

of the thing done by the boy,
think of the boy undone

by a rage, undone
by its rising, rage undoing

what he thought he knew
of his mind, to undo that

of another. Think of the thing
done to a boy that cannot be

undone. Think of the eggs
which are not her eggs

which will become her own.
Wings, fringed

and beautiful. Think of her
exiting, think of her

climbing a stem—waterweed,
perhaps—without which

she would be unable
to lift her body

back into air. Think
of the boy, the beautiful boy.

Think of a thing done
that cannot be undone.

– *Published in The Greensboro Review, Spring 2016*

Amanat

On the night of December 16th, 2012, a 23-year-old physiotherapy student boarded a bus in New Delhi to return home after watching the film Life of Pi.

The hyena kills the zebra,
then the orangutan.

The tiger kills the hyena.
And the boy survives.

Pi is an irrational number.
And a woman boards a bus.

If horses could draw,
they would draw one god

in the shape of a horse.
Oxen would draw many,

each with a body like their own.
And the bus is not really a bus.

The relationship
between the width of a circle

and its circumference
continues infinitely without

repeating. And Pi is a boy
who just wants to love

God. If dark matter could draw,
it would not draw itself.

The human intestine
is approximately five feet long.

Only five percent of hers
would remain. They would be called

joyriders. The instrument used was
metal. The instrument used

was flesh. And the woman,
it was said, died peacefully.

Another Attempt at Praying

I've learned to love
the feel of stone

and to quiet my breath
when mourners come.

I dream of ancient paths
lined with trees

and the singing of gods;
the girl made of beads;

the deer in reds and blacks.
Footprints hardened

on a bank of sand say:
walk, pause, run.

I imagine their bodies
transformed into fish.

Into swallows. Fox lung
or beetle's blood.

A snake traveling through
dirt. Sometimes rain.

Who doesn't notice
the rain?