

Afternoon Still Life

The warm Indian summer sun poured into the courtyard, a welcome turn for a day that had begun crisp. It was almost visiting time as the orderly wheeled the chair into position under a flaming maple. The old woman remained hunched in her new spot, her white head bent down close to her chest, her wizened fingers picking at the blanket on her lap. From time to time she would sway her head from side to side, her eyes raking the space in front of her where crimson and burnished gold leaves lay in a jumble on the ground. It was her deep nasal inhalations that most showed her appreciation of the surroundings. The afternoon scents hung heavy in the still air, an abundance of leafy dryness mixed with the late lavender and oregano in the nearby herb boxes. Closer to her clung the stale decay of her deterioration despite the scrubbed clean odor of institutional soap. What made her nostrils flare, though, was the potpourri pomander tied to her armrest for her afternoon aromatherapy session. It was a pungent blend of cinnamon, clove, orange peels, dried apples, and fragrant bark chips. With each inhale, a flood of sense pictures played through her consciousness. Her ravaged brain did not try to order or understand what unfolded there. She simply relived the images as they arose, overlapped, and as quickly faded.

A pile of leaves, dispersing in the wind, frustrating her raking. Burying underneath them, kicking and laughing. Squirrels scampering past, intent on winter stores. Watching her oxfords scuff through the piles while loitering on the way to school. Hearing the voices of her sisters calling her, urging her to hurry along. The leaves rustling in a satisfying way, and the driest brown ones crumbling easily when stomped. Bunches of Indian corn adorning the porches on her way, as do pumpkins in every size of blobby roundness, some carved, some not, some sagging with the soft rot of the long displayed jack-o-lantern.

A drift of golden yellow falling along the path between the dorms. Klaxon horns and excited shouts bursting from passing automobiles in an arm-waving frenzy of postgame high spirits. Hurrying her steps to catch up to the party. The first sight of him, tall and athletic, graceful in motion as he runs across the quad late for class. A kiss caught under a maple tree and another that lingers long enough for the whirligig seeds to helicopter to the ground. The funny Greek letters on his scratchy wool jacket where she lays her cheek between kisses and the sweet malty taste of beer on his breath. His hot panting and the race of her heart as his hands work under her sweater and skirt. An intoxication of fear and newfound lust exploding on her skin everywhere he touches, and the stretching surprise of his masculinity inside her.

The sweet warmth of hot cider, mulled with cinnamon and cloves. A cakey doughnut dipped until about to disintegrate melting on her tongue. The frequent clamor of the doorbell and squealing "trick-or-treat"s that force her repeatedly to heave her ungainly girth from the too soft couch. The swollen protuberance of her belly, itself like a pumpkin hanging full in front of her, thumping with impatient life. The warm wet trickle down her thigh and the heavy ache starting to tighten across her back, early signs of a long night in labor. The streaked crimson purple sunsets seen through the window from the rocking chair, the beauty bringing her near tears, as she feels the tightness begin under her arms before the flow engorges her breasts. The soft purity of pudgy baby lips latched onto her fat nipple and the gurgling hiccups as the milk jets into that small suckling mouth.

A walk in the autumn woods, earth wet and loamy, leaves decaying in damp piles. A tiny hand clinging to hers as she measures her steps to the short paces. There is a fierce strength in that grip, despite the tenderness of the little fingers, and she feels whole by that connection. Climbing together into their tree with the wide, low hanging boughs to ride astride like crazy cowgirls, mother and daughter, inseparable companions.

Hands white with flour as she rolls out the pie crust, working fast to keep the dough light. Listening for the expected flurry of afterschool excitement, half in eager anticipation and half annoyance at the expected interruption of her baking. The wild hug engulfing her almost as soon as the door opens. "Pie! O Mommy, I love you, I love you, I love you!" An uninhibited joy soon distracted by milk and cinnamon toast and a musical stream of lilting childish chatter. A counter full of crumbs and dirty dishes and half-filled apple pies recalling her attention after that sparkling interlude, and the business of dinner taking over.

Firelit evenings in the post bedtime hush, his eyes intent and openly admiring. Pulled down on the carpet in the living room, giggling secretively, as his lips and fingers peel away her maternal camouflage and reveal the womanly passions that rock her unguarded moments. His strong solid flesh a bulwark for her needs that she washes against over and over again, never eroding his intent to cherish and provide. His voice pervades her, a gravelly baritone giving easily into laughter, a constant conversation drawing her out, sharing each day.

The chill of frost. The crunch underfoot and the mist of blown breath. Trees' denuded branches scraping the pale sky as crow calls ring harsh in the cold air. The house full of asters and russet chrysanthemums. A devastating sense of loss choking her. She can't spill the hot tears that pound behind her eyes, her headache better than thought. A black coldness lurks under her sternum and sends its shooting pains to cripple her sleepless nights. She leans weakly into her daughter's embrace, and wonders how have those small arms grown into this strength?

The afternoon shadows lengthened in the courtyard and cast their shade over the bent old woman. She grew agitated and began to wring her hands repeatedly before they latched onto the solid metal of the ring on her left hand. Twisting it back and forth, she took comfort in that settling compulsion. As if by touching her ring, she determined that it was not lost, she was not lost, nothing was lost. She looked into the encroaching shade and heard again his voice within her mind. Her brain could no longer form an association between the ring and the man, but her fingers did, and their working it around her finger brought him back to her.

Just then her visitor arrived, a tall, stylish woman whose quick bright manners soon filled the courtyard with life. "Oh Mom! There you are! Why are you in the shade like this? Let's wheel you out here in the sun. There, now isn't that better? Look at that maple tree! Those colors are fabulous! It's just like the one we had in the backyard, with those deep reds and bright oranges. You like to look at that, don't you?" Her breathless chatter barely slowed. "There was a lot of traffic coming out here today, but I had to come. Today's my birthday, Mom. Our special day. I wanted to spend some time with you, and look! I brought you this picture of the woods by our old house. We can put it up on the wall in your room and you can see these flaming colors every day!"

The old woman peered up, lifting her head off her chest with notable effort. Her mouth worked noiselessly for almost a minute before a sound emerged. "BeeBee." One word, simple and clear. Her daughter sank down beside her and took both of her hands in her own. Tears glittered behind her eyelashes at the sound of that childhood nickname, so long unused she couldn't remember the last time she had heard it. "Yes, Mommy. It's BeeBee. I'm here with you. I love you, Mommy."

The old woman regarded the strange woman with the neat grey hair and warm, gently lined eyes. She felt the love pouring into her held hands and squeezed back, rhythmically, clinging to the soft warmth that flowed between them. This woman she knew would guide her through the confusion, part the shadows for her. She smelled of home. She would know how to bring her to the one whose voice called out from the vastness beyond the dark. She was the one to deliver her to that strong, abiding love. But not now. Not now. Now it was enough to sit together in the fading sunlight and hold her hand. There was still a glowing grace in the smoldering gold embers of this day, this year, this life.