



PRIMROSES

KRIS HILES

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"Well, there's another place – another country, isn't there?
We go there when we sleep; at other times, too; and when we die."
– Richard Adams, *Watership Down*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ASHLEY

I have terrible allergies,
and I will sacrifice my body for plants,
not animals. Except, maybe, rabbits, I remember
turning four, and my dad
handing me a stuffed rabbit. I smiled,
and I rarely smile. It was a gift for him,
but gifts are forgotten. I named the rabbit
after my best friend, Ashley,
the neighbor girl who babysat. I remember
when the toy went missing, months later,
and my dad told me it was going to be fine,
rabbits usually don't live
longer than a year. I asked
how long people live,
and he told me they can be eighty
ninety, one hundred, then said
people also don't stay together
that long. Come and go. Usually. I forgot
about rabbits. The next fall
Ashley went to college,
and I was sad, all over, with a new kind of loss,
until Dad bought me a new stuffed rabbit,
but this time I didn't smile, didn't name her,
just stopped crying.

THE GODS DRINK BEER

Everyone I knew loved juice,
loved apple or grape or Sunny Delight,
and our fridge was stocked
with tomato. For me. I loved the silk
and the bite. A nectar. I noticed
more of my little cans disappeared
into thin air than into my stomach.

When I asked about thieves, I learned
Dad liked to drink
tomato beer, a little juice, a lot of beer -
he told me, since I knew the secret
I should try a sip. I tried a sip,
and the silk was gone, the bite was there,
and bubbles that grew
flowers in my mind, bubbles like the ones
that ran up my spine in the bath.

The world of the kitchen was fun
and he let me drink the secret
until I sobbed, until the silk threatened
to return from my throat, the flowers
to spring from my forehead, like Athena.
He told me everything would be alright,
we should do this more often,
and his laughter was thunder, his hands,
soft clouds wrapping me like a blanket.

NICE, BUT LIMITED

The drive to the lake was always too long,
too loud. Every year. The rattle.

I remember though,
one summer the car swallowed Dad's CD
of Duke Ellington songs,
how with a big band in its throat,
the car drowned out
the droning hum of the road.

The "A" Train
spun on through the hottest days,
ones where he would take me for ice cream
before a work meeting
outside the office,
and the vanilla would melt
if I didn't eat fast enough,
so I always had time
to make dresses from napkins
until he came out, covered in sweat,
round bruises with soft edges flashing beneath
A shirt not tucked in quite as tightly.

He sold that car -
a hell of a deal, Mom called it -
while "Crosstown" faded
into "Pretty Woman", unwanted melodies
stuck inside it, just like the question I had built
while folding napkins
lodged itself firmly behind my teeth.

MUD

I was running
through the sprinkler
when the end of the world came,
just a small mess in my swimsuit.

My dad sat
outside the bathroom door
while I bathed and cried,
and he called my mom
with the good news.

As I dried off and dressed,
I heard his voice through the door,
about grandchildren and God
birth control and autism.

I opened the door,
threw my one-piece at him, told him
I never want kids, told him the truth, told him
to do the laundry, told him
he would never be a grandparent, told him
not to worry, told him I was going to my room,
and I did. From my window
I could see the yard, growing spots of mud,
as the sprinkler went about its business,
like me.

CHAPERONE

My mom was the most beautiful woman
I've ever seen. I mean, she was never going to be in a movie,
but she had grace, an ethereal effortlessness
in her bones. She told me
I should get a dress for prom. I should at least think
about going. About experience
and memories. She said it with a smile
that curved up into the soft edges of her cheeks,
a sincere smile that wrinkled her eyes,
a smile I never possessed,
and I told her I didn't believe her. I had heard too much
talk about my walk, my body, my face, I told her
I wasn't a fool. I told her lies about friends
and their plans and their dates and dinners. Dad knew
everyone. Knew the truth. He told me we were going
shopping, we were going to walk into the gym together
if I needed a strong arm. He told me it wasn't an option,
and I hated him. For supporting Mom. For pushing me
out of my comfort zone. There are days I still hate them both
for not taking more time to understand
how my knots were tied, how my muscles worked
like sails. I thought of how to sail away
when I was naked, in the fitting room. I screamed
I was putting my clothes back on. I screamed
the ugliest scream I could. And dad stayed calm,
speaking in the soft tones of a late night public radio host,
and when I walked out, the skin of his face changed
from a normal color, salted and peppered,
to a soft pink. Like my dress. And he told me,
"You look so much like your mom." And my knots came undone.
And he bought the dress. And I smiled.

DOORWAYS

A door is a strange place,
half in, half out. The wind blows in,
people smile, people leave,
and the door becomes an excuse
for talking, for not talking,
for writing a letter
that is also a horror story, that is also
a confession. The door becomes
a place where your mom will hug you
until she dies, your mom will warn you,
“Dad doesn’t want to talk about, well,
just talk to him about the game.” So you talk
about the speed of a curveball,
how much energy it takes to run
in circles, recall
begging to play softball in the summer,
and you aren’t sure
if he’s opening the door or closing it
when he says “Cute girls in softball.”
But later, when you’re standing
with the door ajar, leaking heat
into clear holiday skies,
he hugs you, as warm as a fireplace,
tighter than your chest was
coming home..

MOM'S COPY OF WATERSHIP DOWN

 Mom was the one
 who gave me a weathered paperback
 with a rabbit on the front. In the picture
 the sky is yellow, and I still can't tell
 if the sun is rising or the sun is setting,
 but it doesn't matter. I was sitting with her
 in the hospital. She asked to die -
 she asked me, the doctor, the nurse,
 and when everybody told her no,
 she asked
 if I would read to her
 from her book. Across the room
 Dad said nothing, shrugged. I drove home
 and brought the book back. Worried
 the cancer told her yes, or Dad told her
 goodbye without me. It started
 with a line I'd read a dozen times,
 about dead flowers,
 and Dad said, "I don't think I've read this one."
 Mom was too tired to roll her eyes, too tired
 to sigh, just to softly speak
 some simple last instructions
 for a complicated man. She whispered,
 "You should read it sometime."

WITH YOU, DAD

It always comes back to rabbits -
soft, violent beasts
full of dreams.

They will feast in the fields,
green and gold, roll over in the grass
and fuck anything,
declare their might, go for the throat,
and they leave
their mess everywhere.

Before you disappeared underground
you said, "The thing about rabbits
is that they're a nuisance,
they're assholes." You said, "But they're sweet,
you know they've got a family,
and so you love them, anyway."

GOOD MORNING, MORTALITY

Today was a crisp morning, and I hope
when death comes it will be warm,
slipping a knit sweater
over goosebumps.

I remember hunting rabbits,
my father -
quiet as I held the gun, a BB gun - whispers
if you do it right, it just takes one shot.

I remember pulling the trigger,
the explosion of air, and the crater it left
in the rabbit's skull,
a bleeding moon.

I remember the fallen leaves,
naturally brave,
didn't even move
to acknowledge a soul shifting planes.

Today I am afraid -
under the trees
the leaves in the grass are flying
and I am afraid.

STONE HOLDS YOUR LIFE IN NUMBERS

There are days
when I don't think of you at all. There are days
I still pick up the phone to call you
before I remember,
you're not going anywhere, but you're not available.

I moved out
again, I moved
into a new place. I think you'd like it,
I can be at the edge of the ocean
in a few minutes,
like when you and I rode the Wonder Wheel,
a view of the city, a view of the sea. Right now,
I'd meet you anywhere
other than a hospital. Other than a graveyard.
I'm sorry I haven't visited. I've been busy
finding words,
exploring, being loved.

In quiet moments, in the woods,
I hear the brush move,
and I think of you, big ears, soft hair,
eyes full of love and anger and secrets. Maybe,
if the Eucharist is worth its salt,
you're taking a walk with Mom.

Anyway, I think you'd be proud,
Dad. I miss you.

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