

A KENTUCKY OF MOTHERS

By: Dana Ward

Derek what's Kentucky for you?

An orange rubber globe? A jagged blue shoe, Paducah-toed, & heeled somewhere near eastern Tennessee? A place with dirt in mouth & blood on hands & prettiness all over in its undulance & peaking. Where Marshall Allen's lips & lungs began to kiss & breathe. Where, through Wes Unseld's divinity of play, physical reality was altered by his Balanchine. Where the laureateship of Cassius Clay began, in the poem of changing his name to Muhammad Ali. His tonal university of butterflies that sting as those similes collapsed the float of puncture into me.

"I'm so bad I make medicine sick." he once said. Really that's as well as one can write.

But Derek, since you're from there too, what is that place for you, Kentucky?

I know that you can't answer me this morning though the golden-Sharpie'd Peyton you made me keeps watch here while I type this down in our world. It's coke'd up nose still bleeds. So there's always some wilder night in the memory of the picture, an invisible tincture of bumps for me, awakening the implants in the archive of my body.

Fill its search field with some bluegrass. Press return.

Kentucky is mainly a myth I abide because I learned to love inside its stories.

For me it's a maternal place but not the mother-land.

It's where my heart when it was young & small & lacked impressions

took its wealthy shape in songful opulence

of birthdays.

Who were they? All these mothers who seem mothers to me still?

My father, who mothered the concessions of mortality by dying in my childhood, giving birth to me in hospice care, two floors above the maternity ward where my mom, eight years before, saw me into the world.

So her of course. But she is where this poem's going.

June, who was someone to watch over me, desirous of children but childless, she & I lived in a mutual surrogacy. She died with my mother as her daughter, & I as her grandson, recipient of doting forgiveness, flawed inheritor of her one conceptual novel, consisting of the Golden Rule repeated to infinity. Her being was the hotel in *The Shining* had it been enlivened by impossible benevolence instead. By which I mean she was so nice that it was weird.

One year older than me, next door, there was Jessica, by whom I was both brutalized & cherished. She showed me how I was mere thing in the world, another doll absorbing storms of affect. The porcelain heart my other codlings yielded was for her an invitation to explore just how much cruelty could be managed before I ran off sobbing to more empathetic mothers. Her tough love was econ 101.

Then the Barry Manilow mother-hood records in the living room which bore my dependence on preposterous emotion & show. His nurturing colluded with the neediness of children as it lived & lives in me. It nursed some pleading chintz my art relies on even now. Julie Andrews mom of me as well when I go big & sweet to get my way.

Also the Ella Fitzgerald cassette in the Honda, the mother one reveres. Pristine her voices feel for how ebullience to gutter grief & every nuance in between was waiting to be coaxed from the material of life (I mean its music) if intelligence & discipline were paid. To her I would remain a disappointment, & she remained remote in all her generous perfections.

Ft. Thomas where we lived, a nursery of whiteness, so plain in being racist it was clear. You could see the white & hateful core through every opaque surface. These orders of transparency were births in their malignancy, of what to be against in one's becoming. A feel for the structures of division how we're cut by race & class & sex so then The Father in his local form of hoarding.

Chapman, Rex, who I loved with the fervor of a Bieber-ite, who bore what's called the 'girl-ish heart flutter' in my body. It beat its wings in frenzy as I idolized him so. I wanted to cry like Beatlemania when he dropped 25 on U of L his freshman year. No one told me my performance of idolatry was femme.

The boys who were my friends found me so weird in this I wonder now if they thought making fun of me redundant. Some of those boys were my mothers as well.

Blake so pretty, shy & duty bound. Jacob von Gunten. He mothered sanity & keel, & too their limits, revealing the harm of normed wellness in the bedtime stories we told one another, 9 or 10 in bed together, mother & child & child & mother.

Geoff, the mother I would bury in his youth, though then, in the time of his maternity, he gave me life as if he'd stolen it from god on my behalf. His delight & his approval were my joy & aspiration. His charms surpassed the mesmerism Orpheus possessed, deployed in service of whatever's endless lulz. He had some Mary Poppins & the rarest bedside manner, Lake District with his bandages & ornery soups for spirit. I loved him past the tragedy of Oedipus in puppy ways & chastity still later, sitting shiva with the future we were going to spend together. His mother love was funeral & teen. Now there's nothing left to know of its exhaustion.

Some mothers only last a season. Or a day. Or the life of the party. There were only two more mothers in Kentucky left for me.

The first was Allen Ginsberg, who arrived by way of that cultural line I had followed from the Beatles, on to Dylan where I found him, this sort of interesting guy at Bob's side, sensing he's the guru but not being quite sure how. Already invested in what I took to be the outlaw canon, Allen was skeleton key, giving not only his art, poetics clear in DIY articulation, & too the queer in factuality, modernity, it's cosmopolitan glory, experimental & demanding no more fealty to its aspects than what could be accessed for our survival, & the suddenness of vision & of pleasure.

Blood & shit were on the table near a leaky Hebrew Bible. The incense stick puffed *Leaves of Grass* in scented smoke around the angel head of someone who would soon be in his bed & plainly naked as the ethics of the muse should govern flesh. His motherhood awakened all my senses.

He asks a wild question of himself there in Kaddish, musing over whether he should try & do it with his mother, right there in the infirmary, just to see how *that* would feel. You laugh because it's funny then you laugh like woah, it's heavy. He seems really free inside his mind! It's excessive yet from him it sounds so healthy. It's why so many people have him as a mother they remember. So many inhibitions shattered—for the fervor & the humor of the quest.

Geoff & I went to see him give a reading in Kentucky, in Lexington, in 1993. Geoff was no longer my mother by then. We were both still Allen's children en extremis. He read & sang & chanted. We were joyous gathered round him, beamed & smiled in our nearness to the body of our mother, needy, anxious to go even closer still.

So Geoff & I stood there, in the long line with our books, waiting for his dedication's kiss upon our pages, swooning sons with steadfast City Lights. I went first, & Allen asked my name, but barely met my gaze. He lingered though with Geoff, meandered in his beauty, these two mothers of mine, flirting in a way that felt like watching boyish pulp of the initial batted eyes behind my body's constitution. They seemed to wink & dare & coo for several hours.

Geoff rejoined me & he showed me his inscription. Allen had addressed him as angel boy & done a little drawing. What's more he'd invited Geoff to his hotel! We were seventeen. We hadn't been this far away from home, not by ourselves, ever before in our whole lives. 90 minutes by car from our parent's front doors. We were fucking Sam & Frodo in the morning of the ring, two bumpkins all mixed up in grander magic.

Now, which mother were we going to run to?

It's easy to forget what blameless ignorance can be because our culture calls it innocence instead. That heaps too much untrammelled snow & later says it's sullied though the dirt was there from jump, & time refines it. Thusly unrefined I'm just not sure we understood. I know we didn't understand what little sex we'd had, our bodies or the bodies of our lovers, young women lost in their way too, though smarter. All we knew was hard-sold dude lore told through locker room & porn. "Big Titties" or whatever. Baseball diamond of erotic pilgrim's progress.

But we believed good heartedness would certify desire in eternity. The plebiscite of seekers was the carnival of night. The orgy a fait accompli. Now one of our moms maybe wanted fuck! She was making good on bodied promise. Here was the gift in the flesh. We were incandescent with the truth of her, & shared her honor there between us. Precious drug.

First let me say we just went home. I don't think we knew, in the end, at least not for sure, what the invitation meant for Geoff. If he'd gone to find out then where was I supposed to go? All we did we had to do together. Mom's response to Geoff's allure had made it true as cosmic fact. So we departed with our intuitions written in the stars. We needed nothing else for our fond adventure equation.

But now? I think it's a shame. We did it wrong. Geoff should have offered up his pretty body to our mother. We should have offered her one body. Ours.

Because us having two of them was waste of healthy matter. What I should have done was gone & donated my organs, then poured my excess ooze inside of Geoff; *hold your nose & open up you fucking corpse my heart's obsessed with*, then made my was as slime into the womb-less space where I began as embryo of who I was that day. Then he could have carried me in utero to & Allen, & whatever he wanted would be his. Maybe lots of soulful talk for hours of suspense, & then to be joined in soft, passionate kisses, tingling caresses, dissolutions of the flesh at heights, mysteries, pleasures, trembling heavens, nerves made crushed velvet of pre-cum & spit. Pillows then, & slumbers, & a cigarette to meet our raptured soreness in the dawn.

The reproductive algebra of "Veracruz" obtained. A child emerged from the absence of encounter. A darling little thing no more than myth in its material. As real as baby Allen was the day that he was born. Like the make-believe the commonwealth Kentucky is a passion play of mists & bloods & poverty & mountains. A baby like a state of love & nothing in its mother.

The three of us, by never fucking in Kentucky, made a child. Sometimes I always wonder where she's gone.

She's in my ear as Cymbeline to listen for her nothing ghost whose youth has soaked the alphabet with music.

But what's the alphabet to music if it's not a dead imaginary child people think they're so in touch with

one another. What's the internet, the people all keyed up on boards which really are a boneyard of such offspring of our fantasies efficiently arranged from Q to M.

Because this isn't writing. This is typing.

& my mother's an extraordinary typist by the way. The one who held me in her body, near her body, kept me fed.

I'll say more about her soon. What's deep & simple?

But now I'll say I'd nearly left the nest. My last Kentucky mom would see me off into the poem. & though I met her long before I met Allen, the realization didn't come until much later. That she, more than anyone else, was the matriarch that opened writing's world.

O Veronica Sawyer, my mother. I was watching *Heathers* all the time. O Veronica you cared for me so well. Your affected monocle, the way you dove into your journal, an avenging angel coming back from hell at 3pm, flown into acerbic pique by spiritual distress.

You were young to have been caring for a son three years your junior. You were little more than 17 yourself.

Lord I tried to mirror you. I failed. Yet there you were. As reliable as emptiness of metric on the testing day. As sharp as #2's are for the throat.

I loved the way your pen was always pregnant with your sword. All that social cruelty that your soul could not abide. All that degrading service you'd performed in employ of those tyrants who like school days come & go with common agonizing sameness.

You could see the beauty of the omelet life could be! Soon you'd be persuaded to the side of breaking eggs. But tactical revolt was not enough for your dumb boyfriend. He was charming though, & sexy, so your heart kept coming back. With reservations. Although things kept getting hotter. Sex & crime make up the Reece's cup for teens who hate the world. Everyone should eat up all they can!

But you opened up a breach old suave JD did more like blow. He was snorting up the *Less Than Zero* void & killing children. His moralizing started sounding hollow. You knew that you had to get out. When you faked your own suicide I'd never been more proud. I'd never seen my mother hang & smile.

Then after all the shit went down, & you blew off his finger, & he blew his body to bits on the steps, you came home bathed in soot & charring ashes of his body, that red ribbon spider cracked your eyes they were so blood shot, & your gaze was like the feel of someplace years of war had changed, there were ruins in it, smoke & haze, cadavers. We watched *Breakfast Club* with Martha Dunnstock twice that night. I'd never seen so many human tears.

But really as my mother...it's this writing thing you did, this fall & swoop into you journal, your motion made me think the heart's confession's were more real because they fronted, in their littleness, designs against the world as it is premised on unerring domination.

The ruling cliques, the system's ribbon gathering their locks & every two or four Novembers it's some other fucking Heathers, other warlords, other bankers, mainly dudes.

But it's that way you said 'dear diary', like nausea was pining in intelligent exhaustion for the words that thrummed against them in the body of your mind.

That sound was how I felt those years.

It's kicked me out of the house. The house of one feeling for developmental shelter. I started writing a novel. So I became the mother of a character, Veronica essentially, although I had named her Amanda. In my novel she murdered a teacher she hated. Then ran away from home to live in gladness in the basement of a woman she befriended. The woman was a poet who was making love for fun, stealing wine that she could pay for just because, & terrorizing her small town with that illegal mixture of the female & Rimbaud.

The book was called *Never Go Home*.

I wrote the thing on legal paper, longhand, during class, & then at night in bed, Sweet Valley High. I laugh but this was pre-Columbine. Sometimes I think if I were in school now & writing that? Shit. That kid might really be arrested!

God my poor real mom she would have died.

But people say her eyes contain a twinkle they believe in. When they see it they don't need a leap of faith. Although I was surrounded by hate, as the common disasters claimed our town as most are claimed, my mother barred that city with a pivotal insistence so the heart could turn away to meet new thought. My life is when critique feeds from the auras of her care, a violet glow that begs negation as a sharpening to yellow, or a deepening to red that means 'the Real' is not so cool that it is spared a mother's love in its redout. The way these colors drink me is my sight. I have been inspirited to tessellate their spectrograph by singing so the 4th dimension flutters in their plane, the 3rd may bell the heart & move the blood to hear a ring, to honor lights in eyes that shine against imprisoned worlds & for her merry life of grief that rudder'd mine.

For her my admiration & my love just can't be typed.

These are my Kentucky mothers then. The mothers of my heart.

& I've been reading that Yepez book on Olson, *The Empire of Neomemory*, & good lord it is astonishing. He talks about how Olson attempts to construct an alter-patriarchy on the ruins of an already false one. Part of his martial, nationalist project of mythos. Stacking universe & state & self on Pound-carved Plymouth Rock of cock & balls.

Yepez says, in essence, Olson's thing is an elaborate psycho-social misprision. No less interesting because of that, & perhaps a great deal more. It's quite revealing.

I thought about that some while I was writing this, & wondered, how might we construct a matriarchy of the world instead? God knows for truth & world's sake that we should.

But what of this. What I've been writing. How to think it?

Many gendered micro-lineage,

the matriarchs of my Kentucky heart?

To narrate one huge part of one's small life in one small state in one dead country so besotted by oblivion, through mothers.

But is 'mother of' precise?

Should I say 'singers of' instead?

The heart wants what it wants I guess

those metaphoric light years of itself are all it has—its flesh & blood

its Moulin Rouge

its basic make-up

doctored St. Theresa reputation & a problem like Maria for the discourse it keeps

photo bombing like the sound of music.

Alive

in some pretty dead hills.

O god save all the many gendered-mothers of my heart, & all the other mothers, who do not need
god or savior,

our hearts persist in excess of the justice they're refused.

& yo. I have nothing like Olson's ambitions. But my source in varied care is something real in my
song's story. The way we have our source in locks & open endings, still

there was this thing I meant to say

way back at the beginning

of how the heart is dreamed by idiom

then seeps from out of speech & song to wet the feeling's thought

Bullfinch's water on the brain

of love & when the floodplain dries

the myths have drowned alive in their reality of being

to haunt our body's opera as the stories of our life.

That is no exaggeration

it's just a penny on the ground

it's just the repertoire in flight toward ever newer immolations, disembowelments

reunited

holding hands beside the carousel again

then grab your bag

how much alike & not it is the others there gone round & round

how much it's like a plastic pastel steed

the way its piping up & down

distinguished from the other inauthentic breathing

ponies by the magic's fact that circulates between us

like an organ sound.

It doesn't fit beneath our wounded breast

inside the mega-church bewitched

bewildered, bothered

Ella's way.

It's just a penny in the busker's cup

& since you've heard it all before

she'll sing her flawless analects unmoored in static changes.

She writes the songs

she writes the songs she is the heart like all of us are driving nowhere

spending someone else's hard earned pay.

But there's this thing I meant to say

way back at the beginning

that Kentucky is the place I found my heart's real princess soul.

I don't know.

Does that sound strange?

Perhaps it's

pretty easy to

explain...

My heart's eyes are closed when I am walking in the sun, & they dream the way I look in my delight. I'm a princess then & I have every thought inside my head, as well as none. I am neither regal nor belong to special blood, & I am simple in my costume of a levitating pink, cheap in clothes a royal wouldn't dress a beggar's wound in, smiling ear to ear as if I'd nursed on *Purple Rain* & smack, then set out for my walk of painless warmth. There's liquidity of sex moving in between my legs. In desire I'm for anyone & I belong to nothing. I commune with bluebirds in the customary way because my singing is so kind & perspicacious. I am free, never once having seen my own image, existing in my mind's eye as a portrait of forgivenesses received & that's my calculus of body. Effervescence wanders in my system as the animating spa of matter lacking

prime directive, bathing all sensation for an amplifying mildness my being is reliant on as empty, tender joke. The world is all this is in its exquisiteness & filter, the details I receive are simply dialect, & murmuring, a tease made of fulfillment & release. I am beaming absolution in my tulle & my satin, as light means only light has been for pointlessly rejoicing. Shade is little more than night that sun sings for completeness through the liberated objects near my motion. I waltz to meet the billowed bell my shadow is, for sleeping, as sun sings Honolulu nights of me, & endless births. & what was harm? & what was loss? As if 'to love' meant never knowing either one.

But my heart's eyes are open when I'm walking in the sun, & I see me as I am here in estrangement from the facts of all who have in our conditions lost & sang, less known than not & social, for my truth of constitution as it's made.

But still. What is that princess soul so real in heart's release?

It's the absolute mirage that private happiness is seeking in its adequate contrivance of a figment.

It is happiness more actual than blood & making good on its reality by offering myself to me in this authentic picture.

Perhaps it's all my mothers in their elegance & heavens.

Perhaps it is my mother when she smiles in my mind & her contentment comes to life beyond its borders.

Perhaps it is my daughter's joy when I have mothered well.

Perhaps it's institution in a pretty dissipation.

Perhaps she is an emissary born past all of this, & come to tell through feeling how the locks will die in swells of interpenetrating being not yet thought.

Perhaps the heart's the princess in its picture so impoverished it is fine to pump in rhythms that the blood holds out for that

redistribution & no center in our nourishment of motions.

Then the world goes all pre-code so free & post to seethe with titillation.

Of course auto-correct sees 'total ruin'

as if to even speak of freed arousal were an error in the language

mythic imperfection that my princess is in speech.

Our love is god.

It's really touching.

Sometimes I think that I'm just in the way.

So

Derek, anyone

what do you say?

Is it good to call these others as my moms the way I have? Is it care, & if it is, have I gave honor in my song?

My heart tells me surely they're the mothers of its fact.

So many others & in our world with its infinite oppressions

who can know what honor is

or love?

Perhaps it's like Kentucky in the way the state contains so many cities of the world, having stolen, for its country places, several famous names.

Look at a map of the state:

There's Florence.

There's London.

There's Warsaw,

& Paris.

There's Alexandria,

& Athens.

There's Versailles.

In Kentucky here's what people say: "Versails." The twang distorts the reference to the opulence & splendor. It makes it into someplace else that's also just is real. Mother

when the heart announces cities of its birth

in twangs which mean it's from such

storied places.

The way a child of Versailles may seem a gremlin of Versailles

or a princess-man who'd die

to sing his heart out.

A princess of Versails may be a child of Versailles of care

a princess-man alive

to sing his heart out.

& he may live to see the world's Versailles be crushed & freed & *him*

with them

& him with them

& him with them