

## [YOU APPEAR]

The first time I read your poems I was in college and visiting my grandparents over the Easter holiday weekend. My grandfather, your husband, got re-married and this grandmother is the only one I've known on this side of the family. She always had special things planned when my sister and I visited during the summer as kids, and when we went swimming in the pool she tucked my hair carefully into a thick rubber swimming cap with plastic daisies. My grandparents' basement smelled of damp earth and cold concrete. The antique toy soldiers we were allowed to (carefully!) play with were just behind a set of old cupboard doors, and in the center of the room stood an old ping-pong table covered with books.

This is where my grandfather took you out of a box in the form of a small notebook and a stack of pictures and handed you to me. *She was a poet, too.* I sat for a long time at the table and thumbed through the notebook, taken with the idea that you had once had it in your hands. Thinking that my hands looked like my mother's hands and maybe yours, too. I had always felt a special connection to you because I was the only one with your blonde hair and blue eyes—the rest of my family all dark-eyed brunettes. I felt as though you had somehow given them to me, a gift. Often I was compared with you—I learned the word *towhead* and that both of our blonde heads were often bent over sketchbooks and notebooks.

I knew you'd committed suicide, but no one really talked about that. You had been sick, had died—that's how it was always phrased. To dwell on the series of long hospital stays or memories erased is to feel the word *abandon*. It means imagining your body ungraceful, slumped against a steering wheel or side window. It means wondering whether you chose to sit in the driver's seat and held anything in your hands. To wonder if there was a note.

I don't remember the poems themselves from that day in the basement, only that the language seemed antiquated as a cotillion, stanzas of dance

cards and formal bows. Those poems were final drafts, without revision marks or crossed-out words. Your cursive was rounded and neat, and all the poems were written in ink, the end stop of every word a darker blue.

Now, in Houston, I pore over your poems again. Your youngest daughter, who was only three when you died and doesn't remember you, typed them all into a computer. They feel different this way, not penned in your neat handwriting. I sit at the kitchen table and read them aloud and your presence becomes stronger, as though the poems are spells I cast. As though I am unreeling a cord that can reach between worlds, a guideline for finding our way to one another. Like the tin-can telephone I made as a child that I could hold up to the imaginary wall between us and ask if you'd been right when you decided to die.

Each poem opens the gates in my head a little wider to the familiar dark of the underworld. I think you are waiting for me.

## [THE QUESTION]

During my second year in Houston, I write a children's novel about a ten-year-old girl whose mother is gone. I spend days trying to come up with an ending because the mother's departure remains elusive to me. I can't figure out the logistics or decide where she has gone. In my mind, she is not dead; she is simply elsewhere. She is nowhere.

*Maddie and her little brother Max were picking raspberries, moving slowly down one side of the field. Max was singing the bird song whose words he didn't remember, occasionally replacing "la-la-la" with "birds-birds-birds." Maddie listened to his voice, the berry branches rubbing together as they pulled off the berries.*

*"Max," she said.*

*"Yeah?" He looked over from the next bush.*

*"You said Grandma sang the bird song second best," she said.*

*"She does," he agreed, nodding and putting another berry in his basket.*

*"Who sings it best then?"*

*"Mama," he said without hesitation.*

*Maddie was surprised. She didn't think Max would remember their mother very much. After all, he was barely three the night she left. He had been in bed and asleep when Gram got there that night, and when he woke up in the morning and for the weeks that followed he asked for her, but then one day stopped altogether. Maddie always thought he'd forgotten her.*

*"Is that why you like birds so much?" Maddie asked.*

*"Yes," Max said, and Maddie realized he had stopped picking. He was standing and staring at the berries, but he wasn't moving. In a small voice he said, "They always go away from me."*

*Maddie went over to where he was standing and knelt down in front of him. "That's just because they don't know how good you are," she said. She began fixing the buttons on his shirt. "Better?" she asked. He nodded. "Not everything goes away," she said, knowing that she wasn't certain of that herself. Was this what grown-ups did? Did they just say things they hoped were true?*

*"I promise I won't ever go away from you," she said.*

The mother is you, of course, though I didn't know that then.

In another chapter, Maddie is thinking about her mother's disappearance. *Why wasn't I enough for her?* she wonders. At the time I didn't make the connection. The realization came only years later that that might have been the question my mother asked herself, unconsciously or not, after you died.

I put the book back in a drawer and it stays there, the plot irreconcilable in my mind, the central question unanswered. *How could she leave her children?*