

YEAR TWO, PART TWO: January, 2017 — March, 2017

MOTHER OF US ALL

1.

“I always like the sunshine on the houses across the street,” Harry says, early New Year’s morning. I do, too. Craftsman-style, wood-construction, well-porched houses where their owners have settled in like those sturdy bushes fronting the porches’ length.

The beginning year helps us reconsider: Kathleen tells me *Calm* had a damaged cover, so she bought *Joy*. She gave me *Love*, each day a quote from a better soul than mine. I could never think of 365 messages of love set down to inspire, encourage, make me more loving —

although I’ve been loved: My mother listened to me without judgment. My first best friend taught me how to laugh at Ogden Nash’s silly verse. In fifth grade, my teacher came to my ballet recital, surely a ridiculous parade of little girls in wobbly slippers. Then, she wrote a thank-you note. Okay — these are my inclusions in my year-long book: You can call them “love” or “joy” or “calm” or anything you please. Harry calls it sunshine on steady houses.

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As I grew up, my mother let me sneak dabs of her perfume; I bought her White Lilac for birthdays. She bought herself White Shoulders, knowing more about the body’s pleasures than I could quite

imagine. Our mothers showed us

how to shave our legs, buy bras,
wash monthly blood out of our panties
with cold water. We ate Campbell's Soup,

homemade pies. Aunt Jeanette's black
walnuts from her tree for cakes and cookies.
I believed movie musicals were grown up life
I could expect. America was perfect as it was,

except for everything we didn't see in movies
or in our public, white, all-Christian school.
Separation of the church and state? Not at Hartley
Elementary, where the Christmas play rated
as a Big Event. One year, I wore my mother's
sequined rich-green formal, hemmed; I was
a noblewoman bearing gifts to Baby Jesus,
whose manger was in Hartley's auditorium.

I was cautioned to walk slowly, nobly.
Whatever "nobly" was, it was uncomfortable.
I'd requested a classic sweatshirt, gray, for Christmas.
I rode my fast bike anywhere I pleased

until I felt my body weaken every menstrual month;
until I fell onto my bed, stared out the window,
wondered what had happened. There wasn't
pain. Just puzzling melancholy, lack of

energy to get my bike out of the garage,
pedal to the local park and back. My beautiful
maroon Schwinn bicycle, my closest relative –
until my hormones took its place.
I had little bras covering the body's secrets.
Being a woman meant being a secret, hidden

in modest underwear and loose wool sweaters.

I bought dressy shoes with one-inch heels,
as high as I could walk in. I took a class
in ballroom dancing. I wasn't having fun
but taking step after step into deeper silence.
The line between me and everybody else:
permanent blue ink from a fountain pen I cherished,
carried with me every day, back and forth to junior high.
A pen became my bicycle.

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If this New Year starts with girlhood,
it progresses in its second week to
rain, release from five-year drought,
sloshy tires against the pavement out
on Mariposa Avenue. Ardent rhythms
matching my CD which plays Hildegard
von Bingen's chants, sung reverently
by four devoted women – medieval specialists –
harmonizing in St. Ursula's hard story of virgin martyrdom.
She refused to marry any pagan, even a prince.
Maybe Ursula missed out on romance, or maybe
she went straight to heaven. Powerful faith deserves respect,

as rain deserves our reverence, deserves
religious gratitude. Anybody who complains
should just shut up. We need this more than
we need dying trees, the dead-grass lawns. With rain,
the yards across the street – fallow, spiceless brown –
have burgeoned into Irish green, a green that sings along with worship.

Here comes another car, splashing *amen*.

2.

I'm alerted to a TV show defining God. The conclusion:
"consciousness survives" after these present lives.

Last night, sleepless, I turned in bed,
wondering about this possibility.
Then, I heard my mother's voice:
She said, "I'm with you." These words
have never come to me before.
Completely audible, repeated
several times. She died in 1954.

Has she been waiting, alert,
until she knew my friend had said,
"Consciousness survives"?
I slept a little, not the whole night through
but enough to get me into morning.

3.

Harry brings home roses
with the yogurt and the toilet paper
and the walnuts. Red, red, red, these
flowers set in water, accompanied
by greenery, now on our table
in the place we keep for loveliness.

Kwan Yin, goddess of compassion, meditates
with the Cambodian wooden Buddha in our living room,
a corner where some sacred objects gather, including
an orange pumpkin from the fall which keeps its freshness
next to Mr. Buddha (as I address him every morning).

Kwan Yin, great meditator with her patient strength
may save us if we let her, if we keep ourselves attentive
to her myth: When Kwan Yin reached the gates of paradise,
she heard the cries of suffering people; so, she returned to earth.
She gave up eternal Something Beautiful for us. Her little statue
has its place right next to Mr. Buddha.

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Harry said last night as we both fell asleep, “Adios, day.”
This new morning, he asks to warm my clothes
over our floor heater, which he does for his own shirt
and pants. We see nothing but politics grinding away on TV;
there’s fear in friends’ voices as they give reports
on Donald Trump, new president; on our country’s horrible divisions.

I think of Anna Akmatova, banned from Russia’s “approved”
list of poets, in poverty, in anguish for her son’s imprisonment,
speaking her poems to friends who memorized her lines until
it was safe to write them down again. Lucky us, so far.
We are warming our clothes, taking our baths, watching TV.

Thousands and thousands

last weekend marched in the streets for women’s rights,
for our immigrants, for the natural world, for little knit hats
keeping their ears from the chill. I marched through the Sixties
with that era’s causes and slogans: anti-war, pro-civil rights.
I haven’t forgotten that nothing is solved. There’s a new documentary,
“I Am Not Your Negro”: James Baldwin’s life:
Here he is again in front of me, reminding me how ignorant I am,
always because I’m white. I’m angry, too, James Baldwin,
with anybody thinking that I’m wrong to be exactly what I am,
what I can’t change: to be a woman; to have an old, infertile body –
I don’t own houses or a business, a portfolio with thick investments.
We live here in East Hollywood, which a restaurant critic once described
as, “a decaying neighborhood.” She should have seen that we’re Latino,
Filipino, Peruvian, White, African-American, Armenian.
Frank, a handyman for our apartments, is Russian.
When I told another handyman that Frank’s repairs
tend to be industrial-strength but ugly, Ruby said,
“Soviet Union.” Frank had sense enough to leave
that stifling regime. Here in East Hollywood,
I’m the lucky old lady at 1256 N. Mariposa Ave.
with the enormous metal shower head. Thank you, Frank.

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I already have two lemons; I think I've asked that two more be delivered. What's delivered: a bagful, stuffed with yellow lemons. How can I make use of these? So many ripe lemons, so many, many lemons.

Awake, I remember someone wise telling me about too many lemons from her tree:
"I like to put them in a bowl and look at them."

Natural beauty, not always to be used but to be admired.
Plump lemons piled in a bowl, lemons just to look at.

4.

I have two more dreams of gifts to go with the lemons, the many, many lemons:

I sort through soaps I have, deciding what I need to buy. Then, just behind me, I see new bars, delicious smelling soaps, the ones I love. Where have these come from?

Then, the final dream: *I check a pile of panties in my drawer, relishing the clean pairs, thinking that I have enough, although no woman ever has enough of favorite panties, and yes, suddenly, right next to these I find a new stack of exactly the kind of panties I have bought for years. Who has put them here? Who knows what I want so intimately?*

Awake, I write the dreams, and, as I write, I realize: Only my mother would give me sun-yellow fruit in winter, then fine soap along with panties nobody else would think to place in this one drawer. My mother obviously has been collecting evidence of all the years she and I have been apart.

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February, hinge which gestures winter into spring –
Not yet, not quite, but wind today sweeps the world brain clean.
Spring is never simply purple iris; it brings with it birth pangs,
pre-historic fetal growl, mammalian throb: those swollen breasts.

A man walks on our roof. He lops off overhanging
branches from the Chinese elm nobody can stop.
Elm roots tangle through our pipes, make our
toilet, sink and tub a mess of sewage. Above us,

branches cram themselves across the roof: scraping claws,
unwilling to give up until they're cut then piled
along the walkway, chopped into smaller pieces,
finally taken to the trash. The tree remembers,
though, how to make its branches and invasive roots.

I see we have just four more February days before
we're into March, month of the vernal equinox, Nature's fate
combined with ours: Good or evil, whichever runs
along the psychic road, the future path. Children's
shouted laughter now outside our house could be
long wail, loud keening for their tiny past, five or six
or seven years they've lived, furnished themselves with memories,
learned to write their swift identities across the top of any paper
given them to hold their names, not let go.
Once we know our names, our private fate can find us.

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A man once said to me, "Women smell like olives."
My menstrual blood carried the taste of iron. Why not be
earth's flesh – olives' salt and brine; iron's strength?

March, sacred to Mars, our necessary strength,
iron in the blood and this month's stone: Bloodstone,
symbolizing courage. I take my courage from my history:

Once, I cried as I watched junior high school friends
wave and wave, jump up and down until the train
was too far down the track for me to see them.

I cried as long as I could cry. Then, I forgot the friends,
the house I'd lived in all my life. Forgot our vacant lot's
catalpa tree; my secret lilac bush, the Civil War sword
in our basement belonging to my own great grandfather's
courage, not to mine. For the time I needed courage –
years – I lost the gift of crying.

In ancient Rome, this month began the year. It carries spring,
of course, everything's beginning.

The gods are cruel; the gods are kind.
What will it be today? This painting on my wall:
dark blood-red with something like the sun beyond it.
Blood mixed with light, today's first given.

5.

My thought a year ago: "Sometimes
the best I can do is shut up." I wrote this
as birds were swooping into spring, birds
throat-strong and whistling; every day, birds –
swooning, ecstatic. Music that verges on Lent:
sacrifice, dying, then miracle.

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"Lumina": blue letters, painted across the side of a white van going by.
Blue sky. White, humming clouds. A van made of paint and sky, finishing
March harshness. Harry lights a white candle in front of my breakfast.

"With a candle, you're never alone," he tells me.
His love is always a mother as well as a lover to me.

(INTERLUDE: I'd left the family dinner to go outside. I loved my mother and father, the aunt, uncle and cousins gathered the dinner table, but suddenly I had to get away, shivering in the early spring Nebraska weather where patches of snow still lay on the ground, trying to melt but having a hard time of it. I headed for the alley that separated our house and yard from the Saunders', directly across from us.

I walked looking down, watching my step, not sure where I was headed. Then, in the middle of the alley, lifting from a muddy pile of snow, I spotted a cluster of Bachelor Buttons. Their blue was a vivid purple-blue, surprising and beautiful in the steadily darker evening. I knelt in the snow to look at the flowers, their ruffled petals like fragile wings. Even at age ten, I understood the moment: nature's ascendance out of winter's dormancy.

This was proof of God, no doubt about it.

I told no one. My family and I shared a mild version of Protestant Christianity, benign enough, but our Congregational Church never satisfied me. Divine revelation in a common flower would have made no sense in a religion of memorized prayer, solid good works. In college, I lost my religious faith completely. Our snowy alley had nothing to do with passing Latin Literature in Translation. On my small college campus, there was art, though: theater, painting, music, poetry. The arts seemed to me a world of Soul. How to join that world? I couldn't, I thought. I had no gifts large enough to offer Soul.

Ten years later, I fell from my Phi Beta Kappa rationality into emotional exhaustion. What gathered as despair became my gift to the Bachelor Buttons. To find my own religion, I had to live within my dream life, within my true love of writing, my pull toward myth, symbology, archetypes, alchemy, pre-historic origins. I didn't find The Answer but The Mystery, the Sustaining Mystery.

Bachelor Buttons are re-seeding annuals, returning every spring. Once, a long time after my vision in the alley, I wrote in a poem of mine, "I am returned to what I never left.")