

THEATER AND POETRY

I used to love
acting in plays.
I liked sitting
backstage
in the dark
waiting to walk
into the light,
waiting to be
in another world
as a different person.
I liked leaving
my world behind
and diving into
the life of literature.
I liked walking
that tight rope,
straddling two worlds,
sensing an audience
on the other side
of the divide
in the dark and
me in the blinding
light, knowing
the edge of the stage
was near, and
I could fall
out of the fiction
into reality

at any moment.
I liked being
on the side
of fiction but
telling the truth,
because the truth
seemed impossible
to tell in reality.
Now I love
reading my poems
to an audience,
feeling my words
catch listeners
like fish
in a big net,
where I sense
their flailing about
suddenly stops,
as all of us
focus on
the same thing
at the same time.
And the big net
dissolves,
as we plunge
into the deep
together.

ARE YOU SOMEBODY I SHOULD KNOW?

That's what a tourist asked my mother, as she stood in the airport at Montego Bay. My mother had a certain aura about her. A certain calm, a certain sophistication, a stylish way of dressing. She was never loud or aggressive. She was always smart — except when it came to other people. She had no idea how other people lived or thought. She had always lived apart — in private penthouses, private estates, private schools, private clubs, private planes, and private yachts. Once, she wanted to take a public bus to visit me in New York City, but she chickened out at the last minute and hired a private car. She was very subdued in her later years — traveling, gardening, collecting things, and volunteering at the local school. She couldn't wait to tell me that the principal had called her maternal. She knew that I considered her the Anti-Mom.

A friend of mine who could find the maternal in a Kleenex box turned to me after meeting her and stated firmly, "I do not get one *iota* of maternal." Maybe it had something to do with my mother's mother, who killed herself six months after I was born. My mother was like a wild animal in a cage constantly plotting how to get out. I never had any idea what she was going to do next. I just braced myself for the ride and shook my head in disgust whether it was her wearing thigh-high, lace-up, high-heeled, shiny white leather boots with pink hot pants, or racing airplanes across the country in the Powder Puff Derby, or running away with a truck driver and opening a restaurant with "nouvelle cuisine." Unlike her mother, my mother was determined to live, and nobody, absolutely nobody, including me, could rain on her parade.

I didn't know what to do when she died.

I spent so long fighting with her and suddenly she was gone.

But slowly over the years my anger dissipated and now I have to remind myself or read an old journal to remember the difficulty of our struggle — and it was difficult, her drinking, the denial, our mutual lack of recognition and support for each other. But with her death and the end of our fighting, I can finally appreciate what *she* was fighting and how hard she fought and how much she won. Even as a child, I sensed what she was up against. There was no kindness where we were — no neighborly exchanges, no potluck dinners, no hand-me-downs, no *we're all in this together and helping each other out whenever we can*. We were surrounded by wealthy, competitive, hard-core Republicans and I knew in my bones that she was breaking practically every rule they had for how “their” women were supposed to behave. She wore what she wanted to. She learned to fly. She started a business. And she had a bumper sticker on her car that read, “Old truck drivers have young parts.”

Things always had to be different with her — the implication being that there is something terribly wrong with the status quo — which there is, and that is something I grew up knowing, and finding my own way to remedy.

MY MORTALITY

It began
last spring
with the teeth
with the tooth
that had to be
pulled & then
once they got
into my mouth
they wouldn't
get out —
so much money
to be made there
and it didn't matter
to them
that my mouth
never felt
the same
again. That's
how horses
die, my cousin
said, their teeth
go bad
and they can't
chew their food.
Then my dog
was dying and
I scribbled
to myself
"so this is how

it happens,"
a kind of benign
neglect
on the part of
dentists and doctors,
friends and family,
and society
in general. They
just let you
go
without really
realizing it.
I said to my sister
after my dog died
and her husband
started crying
uncontrollably
after their dog
died, that something
like that
could kill you.
Even after I
got the puppy
and thought
I was ready for
the next phase
of my life, I
could still feel
the dying.
I couldn't
stop catching

those colds that
turned into allergies
in the spring
and then my ears
got blocked and
I couldn't hear
and it felt
like I was 90
and sinking
to the bottom
of the sea.
I kept tripping
over the puppy
because I couldn't
hear her. And it's
still happening.
I'm still trying
to make my way
up from the bottom
of the sea and
waiting for my ears
to pop. And those
damn steroids
they give you
pumping me up
and then pulling me
down, down,
down
until I drown.

THIS IS WHAT I LOVE

waiting for a train in
Glenwood Springs, Colorado
and the train is late —
sitting on a bench
by the train tracks
looking at the mountains,
sliced section of earth red
topped by layer of green
with clouds marking blue
beyond. This is what I love —
watching people walk
next to cars and trucks
crisscrossing a bridge
above the train tracks
and rushing river below.
This is what I love — an older
woman with blonde hair and
sunglasses sitting in the sun
smoking a cigarette and
the little boy who just
fell down on the rat trap
nestled against the wall
beside me, but didn't get
hurt. When I went to say
goodbye, my niece sweetly
showed me a photo of my
dead mother / her grandmother
that I had never seen before.

I burst into tears. My dog
is dying and my dead
mother looked so young,
so determined sitting in
the cockpit of that plane —
with none of the resignation
I saw in her later years.
I had to say goodbye
and now I am sitting
by the train tracks
waiting for a train and
crying. This life
is what I love.