Self-Portrait as Homestead

Poems

Jeri Theriault

DEERBROOK EDITIONS
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The body
remains a house unaware of its rooms.

Maggie Smith
Ode to My Father’s Body

I lose my way in the low-note harmonica
of my father’s absence & unfold the map
of his body in the big window of his barbershop

at the corner of Summer
& Gold where he slow stood all-day
poised to conduct the chorale clip-clip

of his trade shears razor hot-towel
talc brush & tonic Red Sox radio
my father tidy & distant not
dissonant. My everyone-knew-him father.
My year-round-bicycle father. My father’s
body at school nights

or Sunday mass silent always
silent but singing in the cellar attic
garage & whistling as he built back-yard

swing-set lean-to edged
garden rows or hosed night after sub-zero
night the ice rink where I soothed

afternoons cold & would-be
wild. His body hunched in the chair
of my mother’s hospital room that time

we thought she would die thirty years after
they divorced. My father’s corpuscles
& liver shins & scapula

his semper fi tough-guy body his ear
his good eye my self-taught father in the city
of his body my beige & pastel checked-shirt
father in serviceable shoes & trench coat who left
his copy of Camus' The Stranger face-down
on the bed in English though his tongue

his lips his throat were French. He left too
his body that night left
what was left of his body left

his Iwo Jima his broken birth family
left his untold his mystery left me
his daughter the wilderness

of my own body that is to say left me
half-him left the quiet why or who he was
might have been what he most

loved so that sometimes I still walk
the hallways of my father's body
half the doors gone half of them still here.
On Returning to My Childhood Church for My Father’s Funeral

When I came here as a child
the congregation filled the nave
all air above encased by window stain
& steeple  benevolent pastor tending
the well pressed flock. *Miserere*
*mea culpa.* French & Irish
we knelt  professed  confessed
& rested from toil at Sacred Heart Church
where my brother served as altar boy.
For girls  only habit or house in store.
*Thy will be done  O Lord*  the nuns
taught. I loved their  vow
& wimple looks  their amplitude
of not. I haven’t been in any church
to pray in more than twenty years
& though this place moves me still—
vaulted ceiling  Mary’s stained-glass
dress—today’s prayer is this: I believe
in Eve  Aphrodite  Mary
Magdalene & the girl cousins
who share my middle name &
sit here with me now  as Theresa
Marie sings her favorite *Ave Maria*
the way she always did.
My Father on Iwo Jima

*The first thing I saw when we got to the beach was dead bodies* my father told the reporter.

He never told me about the black beaches below Mount Suribachi. Or that someone yelled flag’s up during that famous photo op. *It was quite a thrill to see that flag*

he told the reporter though the battle had just begun shells filling the air with smoke.

He crawled snail-like under bullets and got so much sand in his boots he couldn’t move his toes.

*I wore the same clothes for 28 days* he told the reporter. He didn’t mention the machine gun he took over from his dead pal. Or how he kept shooting long after he was wounded. He never told me about the medals for “conspicuous gallantry.” *I could still see their faces—those fellas that were lost* he told the reporter as though his memory were a war movie. *I couldn’t help feeling glad to be alive sitting there alone on the beach.* —Maybe he was crying. Maybe all the men still alive at the end were crying. *The smell of rotting bodies turned my stomach* he said fifty years later. Reading what the reporter wrote brings him no closer. I invent a father with more to say—how exactly that gun felt. Where it hurt.
Endless War

*after Stampede by Annette Lemieux*

centipede

many-footed

organism

flick-steps

as troop

as business

as plague-bent

levers

as band

as cast

as murder-gathered

crows

toads

locusts

as lethal earth-march

in whatever company

whatever conjuration

soldiers lurch-lunge

slice-stepping

well-booted

blood

wolf

breeds

hunger
sixty percent of English words stem from Latin

& like the Romans
America is having trouble now with pax (peace)

which as an object (pacem) resembles patchwork stitched like the green & yellow fields seen from a plane while bellum (war) slips from the mouth like something beautiful bellus a um as in bellissima es you are so very lovely like a belly full of comfort while bells clang out their hearts or is it their tongues tolling war or peace with iron ferrum ferocious fierce feral as in ploughshares from ferrum also known as gladii or swords & this year our gladiolas raised spiky petals the way beauty often leads to sharpness to weapons to blood but arma sounds so much like amor & arms across the chest protect the heart also an instrument of war as in courage

bellum bellum oh beautiful
war creaks its door
   but doesn’t open yet
swinging on its hinge
not war not yet only
\emph{unrest} holding
our bountiful troops
or \emph{copiae} the Romans called them
as in \emph{cornucopia}

      such wild
abundance of the young
fresh from their grandmother’s
quilts so ready
     with their full bellies
& hearts swinging
their restless arms.
I share this room with Reny
and Wilfred who go to work
before I get up.

This morning I hear Maman talking
to baby Paul through the floor grate
and Papa not speaking English

before he leaves to cut down trees all day.
I like our house even though
my little sister Jo
died here. I like all my sisters
especially Rita and I like this bedroom
full of curse words

and smoke. When I get home from school
I draw stars on the wall behind the dresser
with the soft pencil

I took from the art supplies Sister Francis
handed out. It’s a sin to steal
but I couldn’t help it.

I hum Maman’s floating song
wishing for deep blue and yellow
as I smudge over

the pink wallpaper roses. I draw Jupiter’s
moons like in the book Sister
showed us.

I give the biggest moon Papa’s eyes
sketch stars thick as his freckles.
When the door slams
and onions sizzle and the first step creaks
the stairs I push the dresser back
my sky almost hidden.
Willy and Ikie and Ray serious and laughing work in the paper mill.

Right now they’re making a bench and shelves for the shed.

Me I’m making a new rocker for Maman. I love how the pine gives in to the saw the way the plane lifts yellow shavings how the wood turns smooth as silk when I sand and oil it.

We speak two tongues my brothers and me. Spring-summer-fall we plant and build with our Papa still strong at fifty who works the night shift and grows heritage roses.

He sings while he weeds. Our hammers echo down the tight-built street.

Fences tilt toward the river like thirsty horses and houses lean toward one another shrugging as if to say it’s pretty good here. It’s okay.
Homestead

You walk the ends and starts
of June   breathe lilacs and saltmarsh
car-spewed toxins   last
year’s rumor of heat.
Somewhere factories unmake (still)
lungs/backs/hands
like those boom-time
pulp and loom   hard-breathing
jobs your ancestors
glad for good sweat and strain
inhaled dirt and weed killer
breathed smokestack
and cigarettes

work-paid mortgage
happy for over-time   split shift
side-by-side father/son
steady pay-check   girl (your aunt)
in the back room breathed cotton
lint two decades

all of them makers
of their own lives like renaissance
painters breathing/tasting paint
the whitest of whites   everlasting
clapboard-white   chipped
sweet-smelling lead

breathed
pot roses and lavender   cut
grass and clover   inhaled
after-shift laughs and stories exhaled
brothers   father   your aunt
with the excised
lung in the too-small   paid-for
house   everything earned
with the work of dangerous
breathing

even now (somewhere)
a grandfather and uncles
inhale tomato vines
watered scent rising  play
cribbage in the cool
moth-soft  dusk
breathe easy what you’ve
always breathed  grief
and goodness
alveoli enfolding
detritus and duff in delicate plackets
pit-scarring like the wind-burned faces
of far-gazing pioneers.
Asphalt siding and backyard garden
across-the-street Maytag-in-the-yard and down-the-hill
railroad tracks milkweed
and marshmallow

fluff one uncle in the-house-behind another one
up-the-hill half-finished cigarettes
French swear words
and JMJ for JesusMaryJoseph

in cursive at the top of each school notebook page
*Little Women* and *Gulliver*  *The Hardy Boys*
*The Green Fairy Book* and
*why don't you go out and play?*

I want so much from the past and isn't a house a harbinger
of future endings like a child's
drawing with a lopsided porch
shutters and smoke

curling from the chimney? This is where I live
I tell my teacher or I tell myself
in past tense as I write
another poem titled “from”

or “home” this house a grayscale memory
like a church like the ring
my mother gave me
like a doll’s house

in which I make the tiny plastic mother and father
look at one another make them see
their kids as something
other than

little blue boy and little pink girls in their upstairs
rooms open to the backyard
with always the chance
of falling.

My parents sing in their separate rooms
my mother's sadness an heirloom
on the sideboard my father's
yearning a garden

hoe. I renovate the toolshed paint the kitchen
tangerine add a library full
of questions and soft chairs
for the uncles.
The Sound of Water

You have one day to dismantle what your mother left behind. You read the words she dared and pack her things to give away or keep. You listen to the stream tumble over stones behind her 12x60 single wide glad she fell asleep to water sounds like the lake where she grew up. Or maybe she recalled the Kennebec awash in yellow toxins roiling logs a clogged history like the watery names—her mother’s from the lake DuLac her father’s Drouin which looked like drown and rhymed with ruin then changed for a while to Delaware. You find the receipt for her pre-paid funeral and her scrawled obituary. Sixteen shelved books. Two photo albums. One quilt. The framed photo of her parents’ 1900 wedding. Three green glass plates you bought for her in 1983. The church-shaped bookends you’ll keep. You wash her clothes to give away and save news clippings and your letters from France. For a while you listen to the water she bequeathed the rhythms of those names you’ve known and lost and found again.
Acknowledgements

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*The Atlanta Review*: “Self-Portrait as Homestead” (Finalist for the 2022 International Poetry Prize).

*Balancing Act II: An Anthology of Poems by Fifty Maine Women*: “Roots” as “Survival”; “First Marriage.”

*Burningword Literary Journal*: “How the Body Heals.”


*Connotations Press: An Online Artifact*: “The Girl with Almost Useless Hands”; “Returning to my Childhood Church for my Father’s Funeral.”


*eunoia review*: “Charm for A Perfect Daughter”; “Barista.”

*hasret/longing: Journal of the Nazım Hikmet Poetry Festival (2020)*: “Coco Chanel shares her Philosophy”; “Self-Portrait in Bathroom Mirror”; “On Washing My Mother’s Clothes after Her Funeral.”

*Hole in the Head Review*: “Patrons”; “20 Moor Street, 1934,” “20 Moor Street, 1940,” “23 Bell Street.”
The Inflectionist Review: “Sonnet at Sixty-Five”; “My Father on Iwo Jima”; The Sound of Water”; “Hope is the Thing with Feathers.”

Into the Void: “Both Sides.”

Juked: “Reconciliation.”


The New Ohio Review: “Ode to My Father’s Body.”

The Night Heron Barks: “Philomela’s Keep” as “Philomela’s Hoard.”

Poems from Here (Maine Public Radio): “On Washing My Mother’s Clothes after Her Funeral”; “Single Wide.”

Poets Reading the News: “More Troops Sent to the Middle East amid Fears of Unrest.”

Puerto del Sol: “Communion”; “Reach”; “Endless War” as “Stampede”.

Résonance: “Homestead” as “Hard-Breathing”; “Legacy” as “Topographic”; “I Revise My Grandmother’s Story According to Her Name;” “Girlhood Revised.”

Rise-Up Review: “Renegade Rubenesque.”

Rogue Agent: “Cave Hollow.”

Rust and Moth: “Bone Deep.”

So to Speak Journal: “Ancestress.”
The Sun Journal: In Verse: “Radiant.”

SWIMM: “Grandmother as Scylla;” “Marriage Story with Travel and Contranyms.”

Third Wednesday: “12 Gold Street.”

The Texas Review: “Lipstick” as “reaping.”

“Ode to My Father’s Body” won the 2022 NORward Prize (New Ohio Review).


Notes:

The epigraph for the collection is from Maggie Smith’s poem “December 18, 2008” in _Goldenrod_ (2021).

The direct quotes in “My Father on Iwo Jima” come from an article on the 50th anniversary of that battle. Here is the citation: Roach, Heather, “Invasion ‘was a nightmare’: Waterville vet recalls Iwo Jima, fallen comrades,” _Central Maine Morning Sentinel_, February 23, 1995.

I wrote “More Troops Sent to the Middle East Amid Fears of Unrest” in response to the January 2020 assassination of the Iranian General Soleimani. The actual _New York Times_ headline was “U.S. military to maintain expanded Mideast presence, for now at least, following Iran strikes.” (Ryan, Missy. _NYT_, Jan. 23, 2020)

The prayers quoted in “Reconciliation” include the opening lines for the rite of confession (“Bless me father for I have sinned.”) and the Apostle’s Creed (“I believe in one God, the Father Almighty”).

Joni Mitchell’s “Both Sides Now” was recorded on _Clouds_ (1969) and three decades later on _Both Sides Now_ (2000).

“Wife as Beekeeper, 1955” contains references or quotes from the following poems by Sylvia Plath:

“The Arrival of the Bee Box”
“An Appearance”
“Lady Lazarus”
“Poppies in July”
About the Author

A Franco-American poet, Jeri Theriault grew up in Waterville, Maine, and graduated from Colby College, later earning her MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her teaching career spanned thirty-four years, six of them as English Department Chair at the International School of Prague. Her collections include Radost, my red, In the Museum of Surrender and (M)other. She is the editor of WAIT: Poems from the Pandemic. Her poems and reviews appear in The Rumpus, The Texas Review, The Atlanta Review, Asheville Poetry Review, Plume, and many other publications. Recent awards include the 2023 Maine Arts Commission Literary Arts Fellowship, the 2023 Monson Arts Fellowship and the 2022 NORward Prize (New Ohio Review). Jeri lives in South Portland with her husband, Philip Carlsen.