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And We Were Nearly Children

1.

Reading in my garden on a Sunday afternoon,
I realize with a shock that blurs my eyes
when I look up at the flowering bushes and trees,

it's been over thirty years since you died, daughter
I never really knew--as your mother did-- beyond
feeling you kick
and laughing, planning
our future together, as your mother giggled

to tell me you were dancing inside her, as she
sewed your baby clothes and imagined

a life you never lived, a life
we never lived, so long past now

I rarely think of you, stunned, as I'm stunned now,
to stare off into space
and remember those days

in Vermont, that beautiful summer of swimming
naked in the crisp West River that ran
along the edge of our town, of walking
the ridge just across
the Connecticut River,
in New Hampshire, marveling at our luck: to have found
this place, so richly beautiful. We'd started

a gallery and tiny small press bookstore
and thought we might even make a go of it that way,

so your mother could give you her days, Audrey,
nursing you whenever you desired, carrying you
everywhere, even to the top of Rattlesnake
Ridge, we imagined, to look out over

the valley. And everything went well at first,

even the process of finding a midwife:

She was English, and though
she seemed a bit fierce
and sarcastic to us both, she'd been highly recommended,

so we overlooked our shared intuition
and enrolled in her home-birth-training class,
upstairs in her barn those long summer evenings,
with a few other couples; we practiced breathing

and pushing, and we talked about the sadness of hospital
births, the industrial, commercialized loss
of the wondrous experience we were preparing for.

Outside, in the tall grass by the apple trees, there were
fireflies rising, and the stars were thick,
heavy and almost wet with their gleaming.

We were sure of our choice, though our families and some
of our friends were trying to get us to re-
consider home birth: *things can happen* they told us.

Of course we didn't listen.

After all, hadn't mothers birthed their children at home
for many thousands of years, and wasn't
that peace and quiet, that quality of *home*
what a newborn needed, rather than needles,
bright lights and prodding? We were sure we were doing

the right thing. Our midwife was well-trained and self-
assured, and we liked her assistant, whose name
I can't remember, who had been our main coach
and who'd probably be there at the birth too, so we weren't

worried. We thought about names. We were excited

and well-prepared. We'd asked a friend
to help with the birth, and we'd stocked up on towels
and ice, juices and tea. We

had Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*
all ready to play, as we waited for the big day
to come. It was fall. I'd started working

at a start-up magazine, *Family Journal*, out
in the country, in a farmhouse. I worked side-by-side
with the owner-editor, surrounded by his wife

and children, who bustled in and out of the cramped room
we worked in while he gave me numbers to cold-call:

toy companies, food companies, well-known magazines

and somehow convince them to advertise with us,
a job I was totally unsuited for, made
impossible by the dead rat or squirrel under
the house, that stank so badly we could hardly

breathe. And this editor corrected me constantly
as I made my lame pitch, he wanted me to be
more pushy. I hated everything about it,

except for my lunch break, when I wandered those dirt roads
through apple orchards, planning the life
we'd make here, dreaming of the house we'd find
on a beautiful piece of land by a stream,
someday soon.

On the day you were born
and died, Audrey, your mother had gone

out to the country to visit a woman
whose collection of photographs she thought we might show
in our gallery.

She told me she'd been walking along

the road there, amidst the swirl of autumn
leaves when her water broke. I remember nothing else
about that afternoon. I remember the evening

and the news that the midwife who'd coached us, the gentle
woman we'd liked, had been called unexpectedly
to Maine, so the English midwife

attended, with her own infant daughter in a basket
beside her. I remember her knitting while we drank tea,

and I remember her distraction, but we were focused
on your mother's breathing, our breathing, on the immanent

birth of *you*, our first child, who'd been
so lively lately, kicking and dancing

inside. We lit candles and dimmed the room,
and the midwife checked your mother now

and then, without saying much of anything
at all—at least that's how I remember it

now. At some point she grew alarmed

and we moved from the comfortable chair in the front room
to the mattress on the floor in our bedroom and she told your

mother to push, which she'd been doing,
and she told your mom to push harder, she was leaning

down over your mother, growing more
and more alarmed—and the music played on,

and the candles flickered and she started raising
her voice at your mother and ordering me

to do this and that—and I obeyed like some sort of
stunned automaton, not understanding

exactly what was going on. Your mother was panting
and pushing and I was pushing on your mother

from behind, pushing hard enough to hurt her,
everyone was bent down and hurting your mother

and hurting your mother who was panting, not crying
but hurt and when the midwife cut

your mother, desperate to get you out, Audrey,
she cut her with a serrated knife, she cut deep

into your mom who was bleeding, even dying—
I'm not exaggerating—and when you slid out of her—

better say when you were yanked out, you were
limp but alive and someone had called

the police who were there then, lumbering presences
in the dim light, with hats and flashlights,

and they took you, our daughter, to the hospital, less than a mile away, and I stayed with your mom

while the midwife stitched her, brutally and without anesthetic and your mom cried out, not

for herself. She loved you as a darling daughter, Audrey, let me tell you now

from the distance of all these years, as fiercely as any mother could, she wanted only

the best for you. I was there too and I loved you but not the way your mother did. I loved

your mother and I loved the way she loved you, and so I loved you, as a father does. And I

missed you; I already missed the life we never had. And when the hospital

called to tell us you were alive, probably brain damaged from oxygen deprivation,

that you'd never live a full life, probably survive only a few days, we told them to let you go

and then we went to the hospital

to see you, our dear daughter Audrey, in the autumn dawn-light and chill, we were shown to a small sterilized, brightly-lit room where you lay on a counter, on your back, a perfectly beautiful girl, our daughter, with blond hair and perfect hands and feet, perfect fingernails. They were kind to us there--and they were furious too,

at the loss, *our* loss, but also at the simple awesome negligence. But that's another story

and what I want to say now, Audrey, is that after you were cremated we carried your ashes to a bend in the river we'd swum in that summer

when you were so large in your mom, when she was
so proud of you in there she proudly strutted
and held her belly out for all the world to see

and her bright blue eyes twinkled happily because of you;
Audrey, we scattered your ashes beside
that river. And every time we drove

or walked by, we thought of you there, and when
it was cold out your mom would worry you'd be cold
there by the river, and she'd cry that there was

nothing she could do to warm you, and she was
still badly wounded where the midwife had cut her.
For months she thought about harming herself--

jumping off a bridge, leaping out beyond her pain--

as though that would have helped anything at all,
and we grieved together, and she suffered from her wound

which is with her even now, despite the beautiful
children we've raised together. That winter

your mom took a job as a crossing guard, walking
children back and forth across the busy street
in the morning, at noon, and in the afternoon,

while I drove a bread truck through the hills of Vermont
and western Massachusetts, marveling at the beauty
of that place, and we went cross-country skiing
almost every day in the hills around our town,

and your mom wrote reviews of local art shows
and she put on exhibitions at our gallery and we made
good friends as I looked for jobs other places,
teaching jobs or anything that would take us away

from the darkness of loss that was defining us, no matter
what we did or how we laughed sometimes, a loss
that lived in the trees and snowfall and windowpanes,
in the buildings of that town, in the beautiful rivers
and waterfalls there. There was nothing we could do

but move, and so we gave up everything
and started the life we've been living thirty years

in tropical flatlands, salt marsh and everglade,
and we've made a family without you, dear daughter,

who've always been with us, I promise you, somewhere

deep in the blood, in the marrow, in the breath
we share each night, your mother and I,

in sleep, no matter what we're dreaming.

2.

And I think of a beautiful woman who lives
in the woods, a silent woman who lives

in the way the leaf of a birch tree might flutter
in the wind no one feels, or the way any stream

is full of dancers, full of living creatures
no one even sees except her, sweet woman

who moves by breathing, and never blows away,
though she seems like the wind, this woman who can't

be seen, although she is the gleaming
we love so, in water or mica, or in

the pale underbellies of fluttering leaves--

and when the first snow falls, she is that silence
that will melt into the ground before anything lands

or walks there, that silence that seeps down into
the earth and makes those bone-chilling rivers

we drink from sometimes when we're so thirsty

our words have dried up inside us, the words
that might save something real and true

if we could only speak them, and so we lean down

and drink from that freezing river, and dunk
our heads down under, and pull them out again

to sing to the world and each other, and then

3.

sitting in this garden in this other country
we moved to so many years ago,

I look up at the evening settling around us,
damp and still, though the sky is still light.

Crows and ibis are flying east, just above our live oak trees,

toward their rookery islands in the bay,
and Colleen's in the kitchen moving pots and pans

around as she thinks about dinner; the radio
is chattering contentedly. Soon I'll get up

and go inside to help her, but for now I'll just sit here
quietly, watching the birds, listening

carefully for the *woosh* of their beating wings,
softer than my own breath, as they fly toward the islands

just offshore
where they'll sing until it's dark.