

What is Left Behind

by Lisa Oram

i.

My grandma never learned to read or write
and I am making poems from grated apple
in her mixing bowls. To sign her name
on backs of checks, she grip the heavy pen
and slowly curve the words across the line.
I followed her around the kitchen once,
measured what she dumped in bowls she'd known
for forty years. No recipe, just making:
I wrote it down. While she lived, I never
baked the strudel; when she died, every night
I dreamed of different keys, dropped behind
the couch, down the stairs, locked inside the car
Laughing children stole the keys I'd hidden
in my desk, swallowed them to taunt me.

ii.

Haunted keys follow me to chicken soup
and noodles stewing for the new year.
Chopping parsley and carrots, I imagine
I have kin in every woman's kitchen
rinsing dill in running water, holding
children still for sinkbaths like my grandma
lathered up my hair and sponged my skin.
Cupboard hinges creak—I hear broken
voices singing lullabies to spoons, all
the hands that knocked on wood, the dead
inside me dancing. Women of a time
and unfamiliar place, they comfort me.
Like bony-footed ghosts, they torture me.
These walls. I cried here in another life.

iii.

Another life. I cry and love the point
become a line inside my sister's womb.
Her echo. I want to hear my echo.
She made a baby with my grandma's name,
braids her hair and weaves the bread of ancient
blessing. My breasts are ready, ripe as plums
in middle summer, skin pulled taut on flesh
as angry as my moon. I want to slip
the tide inside my pocket while the day
is light. I want my sister's toys. We face
each other in a grueling duel like
children staking out the borders in our
common room. Hurling bricks and terrified,
one of us will win, the other left behind.

iv.

What is left behind? A Name. A Stone. Ash.
Bare Branches. Sand. Prescription Glasses.
Wooden Teeth. A Train Ride. Hair in the Drain.
Take nothing but pictures; Leave nothing but
footprints. Fingerprints. Lunch Money on the
Kitchen Table. Lipstick on a Wine Glass.
Gloves. Umbrellas. Orange Peels. Organs.
Shells. Scars. Jars of Jam. A Hickey. A Valley.
Two photos in a book of poetry I borrowed.
In another book, a swatch of yellow
fabric. What messages keep finding me?
In Muriel Rukeyser: a white square
of paper, urgent words lost while reading:
Before writing, I made a space for it.

v.

I made a space for this: extraordinary
passion in a woman's daily life. Not
the quiet kind of power, not the kind
of terror spilling over into drink
or poison, not some bloody limbs between
abandoned pages. I refuse to be
among the women poets sacrificed,
apprentice to their slitted wrists and crowded
rooms. Or childless. Or hungry. Beware.
I command volcano fire in traffic.
Let them now be sentinels, these mothers,
whom I harbor in my girlish mouth. Let
them hover carefully and distant. This
fire breathes a different kind of future.

vi.

A different kind of voice began to speak
the months before my grandma died. She'd point,
insist—it's moving, there—demand I kill
the breaking off inside her crawling past
her eyes like insects on the speckled tile.
Her long dead husband came to get her;
she fought with him. She raged against a life
of being nice, her meekness known as kindness
by those it served. I knew a different truth.
While she rocked my baby sister, folded
laundry, and later when I drove her home
at night, she told me secrets: I don't like it
when your parents fight. You're my favorite girl.
I didn't want the baby when he came.

vii.

She didn't want the baby but he came
despite her. When he died at seven
she thought it was her fault. There—I can say
out loud what she would only whisper
when I asked. Again last night, in sleep,
she came to say she wants to die. She left
her wooden chopping bowl, a chopping tool,
and I forgive her quiet. No recipe,
just making it. I need to let her go
and not be gone. In forty years, another
daughter, maybe mine, will battle me
in combat with this past. For her, these poems
my grandma could not read. For me: a bite
of grateful apple strudel while I type.

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