

Just Like a Daughter
Cutthroat Spring 2022
Barry Lopez Prize Honorable Mention

“The white whales went with us,” Mom said.

My throat clamped like it does when I suck down tears. When the scales of my spine slack.

I imagined her flip phone molded to her chin during our phone check-in. Her, at an adult family home, miles from my home in Portland.

“They were so beautiful,” she said, her sigh fat with longing.

I wondered if the whales were part of her story from her hospital stay last month, in a memory unit, while doctors adjusted her medication to ease the black holes of dementia, to ease the anxiety and panic and hallucinations that flood the gaps of a brain unraveling. She told my sisters and me she was on a cruise. Everyone had matching outfits (The hospital has patients wear maroon-colored scrubs).

“People are taking the outfits with them when they get off the ship,” she said from her hospital room while I cradled my phone from the comfort of my couch, while I stared out the window at the Willamette River, this chord of water between us.

“Do you want me to bring you one?”

Her brain is tired. Her synapses aren't firing like they used to. I'm pretty sure if her brain were imaged, it'd look like a halved black walnut. Reds, yellows, greens of healthy brains inked over.

“It's so much work,” she said last week when we sat side by side.

“What, Mom? What’s so much work?” I asked while I was thinking: everything.
Everything’s so much work for her now.

“Houses are so much work,” she said.

“How’d they get them so clean?” she asked.

Which house? Her childhood home? The Tacoma home on 10th street with girls Maypole dancing on the wallpaper in her girl room? Or Rebecca Drive—the house she built with Dad when little sis was new. The house that creaked in its guts and girl me was sure it was haunted. The house Dad unhomed with drinking and divorce. Or the house she rehomed with my stepdad when we became another version of family? Her last home on Puget Sound with clouds making sky movies and ocean-blue water.

My brain scrambled to puzzle piece her words. To harness the threads and follow like there might be a tapestry at the end.

Between telling me, “There’s no run back for me,” and asking, “Will you arrive for me?” she sprinkled in: “City-sizing. Sit at the tender.” She asked me for coins, “to pay the man who takes you for a ride in his car.”

“A cab?” I asked.

She blinked at something on the wall above my head. Her always plum-colored eyes more midnight black these days.

I wish I had a key to her now language, to her life whittled back to a seed. I wish I could prune the thorns that choke the roses in her brain.

This woman who loved words. Who taught me to love dictionaries. To be sure about pronunciations.

“Here’s the pronunciation key,” she told girl me when we gripped a dictionary between us, heavy on my legs, my girl fingers slipping down the page, me singing the alphabet song. An oversized red leather American Heritage dictionary with gold edged pages. Always perched on a low shelf, reachable for girl hands.

“You want to say words right,” Mom said.

Dementia: duh-**men**-shuh

Dementia: noun. Late 18th century. From Latin, from *demns*, *demnt*: “out of one’s mind.”

1. A chronic or persistent disorder of the mental processes caused by brain disease or injury and marked by memory disorders, personality changes, and impaired reasoning.
2. Madness, insanity.

My mom. She helped form early writer me. Lover of words. Their shapes. Their sounds. Their meanings. How they feel in my mouth. How they feel spoken. And written. When I started getting published, she started scribbling words and images that sparked her. “I’m not a writer,” she’d say when I visited and she’d show me what inspired her, scratched out on a scratch pad with a red sticky spine. “I’ll never use this,” she’d say. “But you can.” And there in her cursive was: *Dappled shadows, breathing. And ribbons of light in shades of grey. And hair like wires of light.*

Lover of words. Something we shared.

Lover of books. Something we shared. Before dementia nibbled her an eyelash at time, we swapped novels and memoirs. Talked Virginia Woolf to Audre Lorde to Lidia Yuknavitch.

Lover of art. Something we shared. She went back to art school in the 70s. While I was in high school—making-out in the dark room of the yearbook staff—she was making art. Gorgeous nudes in charcoal filled 36 x24 sheets with life, with movement in their stillness. Bodies in sizes and shapes, with creases and rolls. A naked pregnant woman she sketched fast and faster as the baby moved, as the half-moon belly shifted. A portfolio of nudes she stored under her bed. No, hid under her bed. My secret artist mom who saw beauty in everything but herself.

Now as she word wanders around white whales and homes and husbands and coins and cabs, as I do my best to follow her bruised language, her unstitched thinking, I long for my stepdad who's been dead nine years. I long for the type of letting go he seemed to experience. Not a madness. A holiness. When he said he'd fallen through a hole in the universe, when he said he was talking with God, and my sisters and mom and I leaned in, breath squished in ribs, listening. "What's God saying, Mr. Upton?" the doctor at his side asked, her hand cupping his should. "It's time to come home," J. said, straight up, no chaser.

My longer stuck in my throat.

And then Mom said:

"We think everything happens in the past." And she sighed like sky. "But it's not true," she said. "Everything happens now. Everything happens tomorrow."

My heart thrummed, remembering kitchen table talks about time being a construct, about time happening all at once, not linear. Time as worm hole. As hole in the universe. And I wondered how much Now and how much Tomorrow and how much Everything she has.

We're still wearing masks in pandemic time, in keep people safe time. While we visited recently, Mom struggled figuring out who I am. And my husband. And daughter. She knew we were part of the family mobile with rods and weights and balance and air power. But which elements? She thought my daughter was married to my husband. She thought my husband was her son.

Before we left, I pulled my mask down.

"You look just like Annie," Mom said.

Yes. Just like her.

Here's something I started practicing saying to my stepdad as dementia snipped his brain: "I'm your middle daughter, Annie." I started practicing when he knew who I was. I said it when I wasn't with him. To practice. So I could say it when I was with him and not cry, not have to push the words out around the peach pit in my throat.

So, when Mom said, "You look just like Annie," I didn't cry. I slipped into Cry Later. I slipped into, "I'm Annie, Mom. I'm your middle daughter and you are my mama."

"Well, you look just like a daughter," she said, and her raisin-colored eyes brightened.

"Which one are you?"

My dad's been dead four years. And now he shows up as crow. All ebony feathers and obsidian eyes. All caw, caw, caw, a piercing C sharp to B flat above middle C.

On my river walk with oyster sky and muffled sun, dogwood and lavender blooms, blooming, and blackberries twining through wild roses. I walk along the path with tight pink

buds in the bundle of vines. This pink of promise and summer ahead. Beyond the bramble parts, the wet smell of river. The Willamette that winds through Portland, that winds my heart.

A solo crow. Not a murder of crows. Perched on a boulder. Cranking its head. Blinking its midnight dark eyes with a pinprick reflection. The North Star.

“Yes?” I say.

I used to ask, “Dad, is it you?” in the early days after he died.

Now it’s Yes? Because I’m sure it’s my crow dad.

“Dad?” I nudge as a salty tear wets my cheek.

It pierces me with its caw. With its B flat.

It pierces me with its midnight eyes.

River wind pushes my tears, my heart.

A pulsing in my heart happens when I feel a truth. Four fingers down from the dip at my throat. My truth pendulum I’ve called it since I remember. It pings pings.

Does lone crow say it’s sorry like I hear my dad whisper so often? At the ocean. In the wind.

“I miss you,” I say, tears glittering my view.

“I forgive you,” I say.

“You know that, right?”

The crow drops a cracked nut, flaps and soars off. Iridescent blue, like a sprinkle of mermaid shimmer, shines through its raven feathers.

“Your dad?” my husband asked recently when we were on a golf course where he used to golf with my dad. A crow glided in low and landed on Scot’s golf bag. Gripped the rim of the bag with its crow feet.

It cawed its C sharp crow caw right after Scot sunk a putt from ten feet out.

“He liked the shot,” Scot grinned and spun his putter—a gift from my dad—like a baton.

“He owes me a dollar,” he added since they used to bet on big drives and long putts.

“What do you call them?” Scot asked as the crow flapped off.

“Psychopomps,” I said.

“Messengers,” I said. “Soul guides.”

Psychopomp: **sai**-kow-paamp

Psychopomp: noun. From Greek *psychopompos*, the guide of souls. Creatures, spirits, angels, or deities who escort newly deceased souls from Earth to the afterlife.

“Your mom comes through as hawk,” I told Scot and scooped his hand that golf day after crow dad applauded his putt. Scot’s beautiful bass playing hand that fits so completely with mine.

“Right?”

“My mom loved hawks,” he said, and his deep ocean eyes salted up. “When they swoop close, it sure feels like her,” he said.

“But are they psychopomps?” he asked. “I mean—” he started. “We’re not dead.”

Of course I had to laugh at that. My beloved husband, feet in the concrete of the concrete.

“They come through to remind us,” I started. “That they’ll be there when it’s our time. They’ll be there to welcome us, to help us cross over,” I said, and goosebumps laddered my spine.

“I wonder how my mom will come through,” I also said, tears pooling in the root of my throat.

Crow dad.

Hawk mom-in-law.

Will mom take bird shape too?

Or will she slip through like my stepdad in slate and pewter sky? In wind making all the trees dance.

Will Mom sing whale song from the ocean’s brine?

“I’ll leave you a sign,” she’s said on repeat. “You’ll know it’s me.”

I’ll hear her in classical music.

And between pages of books.

And in my girl paint box that’s part of my writing alter.

That’s where she’ll be. Between tubes of oil paint. Between burnt sienna and lapis and moss. Between smudged charcoal sketches she drew in art school. When I smell turpentine with a bass note of Chanel No.5, my bones will twitch like a tuning fork.

Dear Beloved Son and Daughter,

When I die—when I follow Art Mom, Sky Stepdad, Crow Dad, and my ancestors back and back on the death river—wrap me in a shroud. Snip a lock of my hair if you'd like. Play monks chanting. Play Vivaldi and Ray Charles too. Smoke up the room in incense. Dot my forehead and palms with Frankincense, lavender, rose, and myrrh. Put a coin in my mouth for the ferryman, for Charon.

Charon: **Key**-ruhn

Charon: noun. From Greek mythology. The son of Erebus and Nyx whose duty was to ferry dead souls over the Rivers Styx. He was paid with the coin that had been placed in the mouth of the corpse. No coin. No passage. Doomed to roam the plane of the mare, the restless dead.

I don't want to be restless in death.

I don't want to be restless in life.

How does an obolus (the Greek coin of then) translate? Will a parking meter coin do? A dollar coin?

A coin in my mouth.

Eye coins started with the Victorians who didn't want to see dead eyes snap open like they do. Then eyes were stitched. Coins still used since eyes shrivel and melt into skulls. While Victorians were less squeamish about death than we are, while they made memento mori (remember you must die) jewelry, braiding dead loves' hair with 9k gold, they turned away from seeing unseeing eyes.

“After I die, put a coin in my mouth,” I told my daughter recently.

“Not your eyes?” she asked.

“Eyes are fine,” I said. “And a mouth coin too,” I said.

“For the ferryman.”

Did my two dads get coins in their mouths? Neither one wanted the mortician’s touch—plaster thick make-up, plastic fill in eyes to keep the lids from being sink holes, lids super glued shut. Neither dad wanted to be fixed and posed. Hands on hearts.

“Remember me as I was,” they said.

Or sperm dad turned crow dad said.

My stepdad hadn’t said that *remember me as I was* part before dementia bonsaied his brain and syphoned his words.

We said No to the ways bodies are arranged to fake sleep.

What about a mouth coin?

“Here,” I wish I’d said to the mortician.

“For my dad’s mouth.”

“For the ferryman.”

The Greek ferryman. A bow to my Greek lineage: my great-grandparents, my grandparents, my mom, her brothers. My Greek grandad who used to say to little me: “Stand tall! Be proud! You’re Greek! Even though you’re small, you’re big. With big stories to tell.”

Don’t let those stories die in your mouth.

Pay the ferryman.

A Susan B. Anthony coin for later, for Mom.

A coin my kids will choose, for hopefully even later, for me.

May my kids remember my mom's words: "We end til we end til we end."