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Butterfly

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Minnesota Review, Issue 93, 2019 (New Series), pp. 45-46 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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Butterfly

My little butterfly. I put my hands on my stomach tonight and remember you, little butterfly trapped in the bone house of my pelvis, flitting from one wall to another. So delicate, so fragile. So long ago.

It's different with the others, your brother, your sister. They call me on the telephone. They send me cards and flowers on Mother's Day. But they're so old. Unimaginably old. They make me tired.

Gerald lives in Ohio now, his own children grown and scattered. You never met his wife, of course. She's never liked me, or perhaps I've never liked her. Once a year they visit me in the retirement home. We go out for lunch, then spend a long afternoon in the sun room, where I sit in an easy chair, clutching the arms, and they sit perched on the edge of the couch, uncomfortable and ready to leave. Every time I say, "When your father was alive," she rolls her eyes and looks at Gerald as if to say, "You see." I sit, quiet, and listen to stories of their daughters and son. Their jobs, their degrees, their plans. And then I forget and say, "When your father was alive," and she rolls her eyes and I wonder when they will go back to Ohio. It's easier to talk to Gerald alone on the phone, though we never have much to say. "What did you have for dinner?" I ask and he patiently describes the menu, not exactly what I wanted to know or what he wanted to tell me. *Are you well nourished?* is what I want to ask. *Do you have what you need to live? Are your daughters safe?*

I don't ask that. I know he feels guilty about you, his little sister gone missing. But how could he have protected you, how could anyone have protected you?

And the other one, Laura, your older sister. So sour, so bitter. Always complaining about her bills, her new job in Detroit, her brother, whom she rarely sees. "How have you been, Mother," she asks, but I never get to answer because she has so much to tell me. The heat in her apartment's down again. The landlord says it's going to be fixed but he lies. Her boss is stringing her along: no bonus, no raise. Her coworker has been promoted and it's unfair. If she had Gerald's income, she'd move, but where can she move now, with rents so high? Did I know that Gerald bought a new car? She never mentions you. Years ago she claimed that I loved you more. My baby, my precious, my little butterfly. I should have denied it.

I listen and then hang up, remembering when your father and I stood arm in arm at the kitchen window and watched the three of you play on a late summer afternoon, all of you breathless and laughing as you chased each other in the backyard. Your legs were short and stubby, and you had to run twice as fast to keep up with Gerald and Laura. How you laughed! The sprinkler chugged, flinging droplets of water into the air that became rainbows in the waning sunlight. Screen doors banged. Children in the neighborhood shouted with joy, their voices far away. Lawn mowers droning in the distance, the smell of new-cut grass. Such peace.

There are no children here. Only old people and our memories, the smell of urine and disinfectant. They ask me how many children I have and I say three, never explaining how you went missing.

The sun set early that day. There was an autumn chill in the air, and later I couldn't recall whether you'd worn a sweatshirt and what you'd eaten for breakfast. So many mornings blurred together, all of you late for school, rushing out the door with permissions slips to sign, lunches to remember, homework, gym clothes, jackets. Laura had a rehearsal for a play after school. Gerald had soccer practice. It wasn't the first time you'd walked home alone. The police asked if you'd run away, but I knew better. They asked if you hitchhiked, but you wouldn't do that. Did you have a boyfriend? Of course not. You were only fourteen.

How many times did we drive that route, over and over? How many times did we pace through the arroyo by the road, the woods on the other side, looking for a clue, any clue? Your pink backpack, the blue sneakers you wanted so badly, the red polka dot scrunchy you wore in your hair.

I saw a young girl with a ponytail and braces on TV tonight and my heart stopped. For a moment I was sure it was you. Out there somewhere still.

Alone in my bed, I stare at the dark ceiling, lost in the past, remembering you as you once were, eternally young. I caress my bare stomach under my flannel nightgown and imagine that I can feel a fluttering inside. My little butterfly, so delicate, so fragile, returned to me at last. Safe.