Boston Piano

by

Joan Larkin
"Afterlife" first appeared in the journal *Natural Bridge*.

**For My Father**

I swim the Australian crawl across the cold pond
though frogstroke comes easier,
stare at the fire in case it spits a spark
and sends the roof sky-high,
measure the doorframe and mark where the hammer
should strike, for my father I iron first the collar then
the yoke, sleeves, placket, crawl down the steep
bank and cross stones to where deer drink,
find Orion, gold Venus, Cassiopeia,
hold a match to a needle, dig out the splinter,
dig deep holes in the dirt and plant Bourbon roses,
let the cold be cold, eat bitter roots,
keep thrift in the kitchen, sweep the cellar clean,
kneel in strange churches, pray in alien tongues,
come home, turn on lights all over the house
and sing as loud as I can
with everything I'm still made of.
Solo

The drive, Boston to Newport,
in slanting rain, the plastic tent,
beer in a plastic cup, my ruined
dress, soaked hair, the solo
horn ripping bottom to top,
its cheerful impatient shriek
poised between schlock and paradise
never heard on any record,
the long trip back, the feeble heater—
me shivering while Harvey Smith,
odd duck of Cambridge, Mass,
pored over his map by flashlight,
the night truly over when I heard
how my father had watched through the window
and thought he knew what he’d seen
as I argued with Harvey, engine running,
then walked up solo, 3:00 a.m., to be punished
when all I'd done this time
was ride hours in numbing rain
one whole New England state from home
and sneak into my father's house
after I'd clapped for Louie Armstrong
live, in the flesh, not even knowing
the half of what I was hearing.
Royal

A black machine rose
high off the wooden desk
upstairs at the Chelsea Olympia
where Dad sat in his thirties—
wide tie, middle part,
mute eyes, sniper
wit I didn’t know yet.
He lifted me onto his lap:
Go ahead. I pressed
the Royal’s round keys
and ink bit paper.

Afterlife

I’m older than my father when he turned
bright gold and left his body with its used-up liver
in the Faulkner Hospital, Jamaica Plain. I don’t
believe in the afterlife, don’t know where he is
now his flesh has finished rotting from his long
bones in the Jewish Cemetery—he could be the only
convert under those rows and rows of headstones.
Once, washing dishes in a narrow kitchen
I heard him whistling behind me. My nape froze.
Nothing like this has happened since. But this morning
we were on a plane to Virginia together. I was 17,
pregnant and scared. Abortion was waiting,
my aunt’s guest bed soaked with blood, my mother
screaming—and he was saying Kids get into trouble—
I’m getting it now: this was forgiveness.
I think if he’d lived he’d have changed and grown
but what would he have made of my flood of words
after he’d said in a low voice as the plane
descended to Richmond in clean daylight
and the stewardess walked between the rows
in her neat skirt and tucked-in blouse
Don’t ever tell this to anyone.
An Egg

He pulled an egg from his ear
a silver dollar from his sleeve
a string of girls in skirts from folded paper
made a pumpkin leer
lit a Sabbath candle in its head
made rabbit, monkey, a man
with a hump cross the wall.
Shone the flashlight on his own lips
pulled wide, the mouth of a monster.
Made unholy sounds in his throat
& kept it up
even when I begged him
Stop.

Apprentice

I must have been five or six
when we lived in Everett during the War:
Donald could identify every plane
and collected scrap in an old carriage
for we were patriotic
and Bobbe darkened the kitchen, rehearsing
for air raids. Winter then was like this one,
always night,
and thick sooty ice hid the sidewalk,
and I’d go down to the cellar
behind Dad—I was the one
who stood and watched while he loaded the shovel
and aimed black chunks at the fiery
mouth. He let me try it—
didn’t he? Don’t I remember the weight
of the wooden shovel, the weight of coal
picked from that heap without light
under the chute. And if he did say
You do it, then that was the moment
I first tried lifting my father’s
burden, taking on his work, climbing
down steep wooden steps
to feed the thing that was always there
in the dark with its mouth open.
Little George

stands in his short dress
leaning out of a photo
eyes already orphaned
already opened—blue
dazzlers like the smile.
Four, and already my father.

Missing

his rack of extravagant ties
his flat onyx ring the size of my thumbnail
flat gold cigarette case kept full
till he quit cold turkey seven years
before he smoked again his last year
scarred tennis racket school violin
seized with violent joy
Boston piano loud off-key
Album for Grown-up Beginners
"Nature Boy"—circus turtle he sang to
and kept alive with eggs and meat
bookcase he built me with curved shelves
A Child's Garden of Verses Arabian Nights
Heidi when I had measles
watercolor Alps to cool fever
"Good morning, Glory" half-sung
accent they never get right in movies
seeds he saved for next year
black Parker pen looped signature
love on dozens of missing letters
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