

THE GREEN BATH TUB

A collaborative work by: Staci Bleecker, J Julie, Dan Redondo, Felicia Krieti

The lines are separated by distance, but weakened in no manner. My grandmother had died as my mom's plane touched down. Shuttling back and forth between Simi and Minneapolis, waiting for the inevitable, had become a financial burden for my family. So Mom came home, knowing that it might be the last time she'd see her mom alive. The lines were stretched again, but incredibly, like some unique silly putty, they grew stronger as Grandma's life came to an end. Mom rushed to the airport, catching the midnight flight back to Minneapolis, but the plane's wheels touched down close to the same time she died. And we got the call.

One week earlier, I had purchased a new suit, dark but not too funereally depressing, so that I could wear it for other, more livelier, happier events, and a new piece of luggage, a green carry-on bag, in preparation for the unavoidable trip I knew was coming. I felt somewhat depressed and a little strange, not because I knew my grandmother was dying (I hardly knew her, only seeing her a handful of times, mostly when I was under the age of ten), but because I was looking forward to going back, to seeing my cousins, my aunts and uncles, all of whom I had not seen for five years. Ironically, the last time I saw them was June, 1987, when my grandfather died (a morbid joke later swept through the family that it takes a death to get the Redondo's out for a visit). But here I was, facing the death of my mom's only surviving parent, actually happy to be going. I could picture my cousin Dave (who's the same age as me), holding his one-year old boy in his arms, the look of joy at being a father in his eyes. I would see Jeremy (also my age) standing next to him. Will he be taller than I remembered? Of course, he would, but this was a boy who entered kindergarten a year late because he was too small to climb the steps up the bus. But most importantly, I saw past their faces and looked at a question that was eating my insides. Would we still be friends? Would we laugh as we did when we were young, building forts out of broken twigs, fishing for dogfish with the day's cut-up perch? Would we remember sitting on lawn chairs in two feet of water at the far end of the lake on a hot summer day, far more interested in finishing the case of beer than catching any fish, even though we were only fifteen? Would that be enough to rebuild the friendship, even if only for a few days, brought together by the death of our grandma, or would we sit in the awkward silence brought about by our changing bodies, new interests, and loan payments? These were my thoughts, my anxieties, as I boarded the plane along with my two sisters and my father. And I felt sick, somewhat twisted, because I was happy.

The funeral was sad, as all funerals are, but I mourned not for my grandma, who I did not know well enough to feel her loss, but for my mom and all her brothers and sisters. Jerry, her brother, said in jest, "We're now orphans" and everyone laughed, but twenty minutes later, the weight of his words sank in and it was no longer funny.

I hear applause. Somewhere I heard you defy me. You bastard, the rain is eminent. Snow too. And pipes freeze.

I loved to play when four years old with string and launch a great yellow balloon. We were going out there with the video cam to try to record the demise of the Putt Putt Railroad set inside the hut made of cardboard and chain link. When you're four years old you're supposed to believe everything you're told. You're supposed to believe lying is wrong.

I could start again. Let me start again...

Jesus is coming to the bowling alley converted to a dance floor. But what have I to offer? Orange and grenadine syrup?

I slipped, bled, watched the flesh on the meaty part of my hand below the thumb flower. Rose. 26 times in a mass of people dancing. Rose was in the mood to dance. And Jesus wrapped around the mass, warped, dipped into the deep end sniffing and bruised. Stared. His original piece incoherent. The mass of people not waiting danced out the third floor window. The fudge was thick. Jesus lost his mind. The trip hard.

But I would miss the party, the action, where all the fun is. Where I could become depressed because I have the same ugly past I go to sleep with every night. Ken's bagels and lemon pancakes, picking strawberries from Mom's clay pots, dipping cut crystal cups into the sludge. I miss these too. Being four years old. Believing everything I'm told. I wouldn't have to think Jesus is coming because he wouldn't have to. The liar, the freak.

"We're now orphans" and everyone laughed, but twenty minutes later, the weight of his words sank in and it was no longer funny. The liar, the freak.

This is *my* autobiography.

To me, at fourteen, when my mother began to spill these stories like hidden stones in her pockets, I collected them all and have carried them since. I refuse to think my mother was alone. "God watched over me," she says. No mother it was me: time is a circle and we have been alone together ever since.

I too have been in wood hotels with wires dangling light bulbs, bare windows, and bug ridden beds. There were days when I ate nothing but old boiled potatoes and colorless soft candies. And there were days when I did nothing but walk to get to someplace warm. But I had shoes. And I didn't have to be there.

Looking out the window of just such a hotel, the Meakhong wide and unforgiving

flowing by, I noticed the tropical clouds swelling pink at sunset, the tops of trees still green and the water so black it would take everything. There were times when I could lift my head to the sky. "Such a gift as this," I thought, "Just to see this, to see only this." And so I say to my mother: "Didn't ever such a sun shine on you with your bare feet and scratched, fruit picking hands? I'd swear you've never seen the sun set. But I don't think I travel to see them for you, but to some how see you."

VI

I have been to Pang-La, the mountain pass leading to Chomolongma¹, crossed the Brahmaputra the tributary to the Ganges, I stood at the Ganges and thought "Oh yes, this, this is my life." But my life is hers and though I have traveled long and hard to forget it, I've come back to her voice, her world, *her* wooden hotel with the single lightbulb suspended by a naked wire. Everywhere I have been has passed like a shadow over my mind, but everywhere she's been is mine forever. In Guilin, Kunming, Dali. I have seen monks in yellow crescent shaped hats blowing their horns in distances she will never know. Didn't I see the hands of Avalokitesvara, the dance of Shiva Nataraj? Didn't I bow to the Buddha of the Future in Shigatse, in dirt road obscurity, in mud brick nowhere? Is my voice that hallow nothing, that dull recounting of things happened but not alive? Is it that I am a ghost every where but here, in this land where my mother, my grandmothers and great, great grandmothers were born? Time is not a line that one can pull in, a fish mouth hooked securely at the end.

The photographs I hold from other times concerning *my* past are water color sketches dripping into nowhere. Only in black and white can I see my mother: her thin legs leaning against *her* mother under some tree. Where are you? Can I go there now? I am an archaeologist digging for the past you so carefully guard from me.

"Why do you have such strange dreams?" she asks me: "Because, mother, I am looking, looking for you someone I can already see."

VII

She must have been eighty-nine years old and, creased and smiling, she let me take her picture. I came to see the monastery in the extreme north of India where nothing is green and she sat spinning coarse wool on a hand held spindle, facing the sun. For whom did she spin, I thought and why did she do it outside the monastery gate? Was it to hear the chanting of the monks or was it to see me? To twist the spindle and let it fall, again and again, the repetition like an instinct so that she could finally look away from her work to see: these strangers, their pale faces and thin clothing coming all this way, some to see monasteries and mountains, others to see her spinning her wool and looking back at them.

¹Tibetan appellation for Mount Everest meaning Mother Goddess of the Earth.

She closed her eyes as I snapped the photo. And I could see my mother's face when it would be old, old like the spinning of wool outside a monastery. I could see her old hands moving, working even then, to smooth and pull in all the threads of her life and I, her daughter, looking on like a passerby offering only a photo and no loom. Offering only my scavenging eyes and a voice I can hardly call my own. And so I say to my mother: "It isn't even you I see, but the you I've found."

"We're now orphans" and everyone laughed, but twenty minutes later, the weight of his words sank in and it was no longer funny. The liar, the freak. And so I say to my mother: "It isn't even you I see, but the you I've found."

I keep leaving this land like it isn't cool anymore. Is that the reason I never liked the bastard who ran off with the bag of oranges? Then I slipped. And I bled on my sense of security.

I ran across the lawn onto the meaty part of my hand below the shoulder. A trumpet blew. And I knew. I tried to think.

I stayed in the room by myself, thinking of Jane. Jane with the citrus everywhere, out the window on the third floor moving, slept, and walked. I see their feet, the man was getting ready to throw up colors and sunlight of the past. Throw up Ken's famous lemon pancakes.

Ken cradling Rose. Kisses her cheek. Applause... trumpet.

The bag of oranges. Orange and grenadine syrup over Ken's lemon pancakes. Pass the punch bowl. Punch Rose, thinking of Jane.

I've been wondering about Crank. Hey. Crank was seen Thursday at the place where there wasn't really a river, driving slowly on a deserted road under the wood floor that in the past few years was stained. I was wondering why it happens to people in the cold.

Crank wrapped his left arm, free of punch, around the bag of oranges. Smell it buddy. He was Davy Crocket. Here I feel even less a part of things than in Hollywood. So I ran in the house and even lied, I said, "I think I hear my Mom calling me."

Applause... Trumpet.

Not wasting any time I go to sleep to be reminded to know the people. Is he feeling better? Checkers and all the people in the room? They wanted to be me too, to be somewhere else, to see their own darkpurplered color. And I believed them because that, too, was security.

"We're now orphans" and everyone laughed, but twenty minutes later, the weight of his words sank in and it was no longer funny. The liar, the freak. And so I say to my mother: "It isn't even you I see, but the you I've found." And I believed them because that, too, was security.

January 5, 19__

All invited to cash in on the Big Ash Out. Ascent up to HOLLYWOOD sign leaves at 3 pm to drink and chant sarcasm as we release Dent to the clouds.

PS. Bring your own crunchables, noisemakers, etc...

Then all meeting/re-convening at Carlos' pad for performance art/tribute to Dent. 11 pm.

Cranberry punch, death spiral, rainbow sherbet placenta vomit. Everyone kept dipping cut crystal punch cups into the sludge. Crank hovered nearer the door than usual. His tailored blonde hair fashioned after Rose's design, his head loosely fastened to his blue gabardine, the same suit he wore to the wedding, and now without...well, fashion changes doesn't it? And Dent wouldn't mind.

Crank. Push past Rose, pushes past Rose, pushing Rose past the punch bowl to... punch Rose. The bowling alley conversion to a dance floor has been a good idea but... no, Crank he wasn't, he isn't, isn't he in the mood to dance? dance to Rose's mood? Crank wrapped his left arm free of punch around her thick pillowing waist - wasn't it thick? the mass of people dancing, not waiting, Crank wrapped his left arm around Rose's waist and threw his punch, and punched Zipperhead, as he swung her around, not wasting any time - vomits.

I would only be going to escape the parties the action where all the fun is, where I could start again and not have to be reminded, to know the people. This is where I could live disconnected from the two. I wouldn't have to think "Jesus is coming," because he wouldn't have to. The things would be new and fresh and to create I would just bring my grandmother along with me so she wouldn't have to have that same ugly past I go to sleep with every night. But somewhere I have heard that the rain is eminent, snow too. The pipes freeze I hear. Can't wait any longer.

Bewildering, the crimes of nature. I feel powerless~ entirely powerless. What have I to offer? Here I feel even less a part of things than in Hollywood. Rain is eminent. Snow too. The pipes freeze I hear. Can't wait any longer.

Sampson steam bath. Orange and grenadine syrup over Ken's Lemon pancakes. I miss these too. With technology these days you'd think citrus would be everywhere. It is I guess in Citrus Halos. The children glow but the mill of sorrowful laughter is more noticeable along Main Street. "Jesus is Coming."

"We're now orphans" and everyone laughed, but twenty minutes later, the weight of his words sank in and it was no longer funny. The liar, the freak. And so I say to my mother: "It isn't even you I see, but the you I've found." And I believed them because that, too, was security. "Jesus is Coming."

We live as we dream—but weakened
in no manner.

Is it that time is funerally depressing so that I wear the cries of my ancestors? The photographs I hold of mosquitoes and fireflies bring the sense of home like water color sketches dripping into nowhere, which was where I saw you, your thin legs in California where the only open land is desert. Where are you? Can I go there now? I am hours away and an archeologist in my tiny family with only the past so carefully guarded from me.

It was in Uncle Clary's voice, I was asked why I have such strange dreams. My dreams pull me into a strong embrace, whispering that I'm a stranger looking, looking for someone I can already see. Those words could never be spoken by people back home.

She must have been eighty-nine and it was in me, too, the overwhelming desire to smile. She let me take her picture. I came to see the rust eating away at the extreme north of India where nothing is green, but what it is I do not remember. The coarse wool on her hand-held spindle settled to the earth. The dust of our feet settled outside the monastery gate. Or was it her settling in my eyes? Or was it the monks? Or was it me, twisting against the thick woods on the right road, again and again, the repetition becoming like an instinct? I bent my head to see these strangers, isolated, alone, coming all this way to see their memories being made, mountains, monasteries and others to see her spinning her wool. I was never close to my mother.

My mother: the calm lagoon was the fact, the one in church on Sundays, that one that made me think I was being cheated. Let the earth be your mother below you. My mother stands between me and the strength that tears me apart.

"Will I ever see these people again?" my sister says to me when we meet, the time always growing nearer to leaving. The sage she carefully wrapped with twisted yarn was overwhelming. I smudge my sage when I feel afraid, but I do not cry. She learned this from the medicine man in Uncle Clary's voice when he spoke under the trees near the sweat lodge, whispering: "You're a hawk." And again: "You're an eagle." The Old Songs could never be spoken by my sister with her black hair and medicine bag. She takes for granted who I am. That's why she left the reservation. How could she know? I took her sage and hid it both of us knowing the overwhelming desire to smile.

This is my autobiography. To me, at fourteen when my mother stood in two feet of water at the far end of these stories, we would sit, if only for a few days alone, together. Looking out the window, I didn't mourn for the lack of forgiveness—I didn't know enough to feel her loss—I mourned for the sunset, the tops of trees still green, no longer funny. The water was so black and I was dead tired having been awake for the tropical clouds swelling

pink before the storm.

"We're now orphans" and everyone laughed, but twenty minutes later, the weight of his words sank in and it was no longer funny. The liar, the freak. And so I say to my mother: "It isn't even you I see, but the you I've found." And I believed them because that, too, was security. "Jesus is Coming." The water was so black and I was dead tired having been awake for the tropical clouds swelling pink before the storm.

Ken always promised he would make his famous lemon pancakes for me. He promised that morning I woke up early to make breakfast for Ben and Ken, the morning I cut my hand with the knife. I had a good grip on the bagel but there was too much noise, the traffic, the MUNI, the men downstairs collecting bottles and loose change, stealing the good clothes from the corner Laundromat. Jane with the squeaky clothes line outside my kitchen window on the third floor moving her sheets faster because the boy, her man, was getting ready to throw up out the window and then take Jane to bed. The rhythmic thump of Jane's head hitting the wall, the noise, the smell of his damn cigarette, and Jane would cry. The knife slipped and I bled on Ken's bagel. I watched the flesh on the meaty part of my hand below the thumb flower open. Beautiful darkpurpleredflower blood and I tried to think. If the blood is dark purple does that mean it is oxygenated? And so I called out but they could not hear me over the noise, the traffic, Jane crying. I held out my hand in front of me and dripped walking down the hall. The wood floor that had been painted over a total of 26 times in the past few years was stained. The path I walked over, the map decorated down the hall my beautiful darkpurpleredflower. The sock stained too. The white one with the blue and yellow stripe that Ben grabbed from my top drawer to stop the blood, the color, the staining. And they brought me downstairs, the noise, the MUNI, the men. Ken drove me to Davie's Medical Center two and a half blocks away which normally I could walk but I was feeling faint by now. My blood, my color running staining the floor my sock the sidewalk. I got in the car, Ken's "Big Red Thing" he called it, the Isuzu Trooper and his voice was promising Ken's famous lemon pancakes. The nurse in the ER began to bitch when we got there until she saw the sock, her floor, her countertop. Stained. They let me in a room and all the people in the waiting room with sniffles and bruises stared. They wanted to be me too, to be somewhere else, to see their own darkpurplered color. I stayed in the room by myself and oddly, thinking of my mother, Minnesota, thinking of Jane. But as soon as the man came in he sewed up my hand and I began to miss Ken's lemon pancakes. And I felt safe.

Shallow I know and I don't want to talk about that either. I can't face the weakness in myself to give full attention to the relationship. Maybe that will come later, maybe when the tension is relieved, maybe we'll hear from those bums. Maybe.

And Ken's lemon pancakes. They become security, especially if you've never really

had them at all but have only been promised them. Someday. Somewhere. Can't wait any longer. I stayed in the room by myself and oddly, thinking of my mother, Minnesota, thinking of Jane.

"We're now orphans" and everyone laughed, but twenty minutes later, the weight of his words sank in and it was no longer funny. The liar, the freak. And so I say to my mother: "It isn't even you I see, but the you I've found." And I believed them because that, too, was security. "Jesus is Coming." The water was so black and I was dead tired having been awake for the tropical clouds swelling pink before the storm. I stayed in the room by myself and oddly, thinking of my mother, Minnesota, thinking of Jane.

The lines are separated by distance, a beige and powdery dirt, that held my ancestor's feet. Shuttling back and forth, I walked over their prints, separated only by concrete. So Mom came home, knowing by voice does not come, but is stretched again, like some unique silly putty.

One week earlier, I purchased a new suit, dark, like my grandmother, who left the reservation. I myself asked: What am I seeking? More livelier, happier events? A new piece of luggage, a green carry-on bag? Is it only this land that swells up and bites me, in preparation for the unavoidable trip I knew was coming? Is it that time is not a line, but a circle, and here I am, depressed and a little strange, not because I knew my grandmother was dying, but because I am ringed with the cries of my ancestors?

When I was twelve (or was I ten?), my chore was to clean the green bathtub. I dreamt that faces, of my cousins, my aunts, my uncles, all of whom I had not seen for five years, appeared on the bottom of our bathtub as I knelt to clean. As though the bottom were the surface of a still pool, the faces floated to the top, expressionless. Ironically, the last time I saw these faces, also with a rag in hand, was when my grandfather died in June 1987. I rubbed vigorously, trying to wipe them away, but there I was, facing the death of my mom's only surviving parent. But as soon as they were gone, others would replace them; I saw Dave, my cousin (the same age as me), holding his year-old boy in his hands. I ran across the lawn, onto the west-heading concrete, until from over my shoulder, a trumpet blew. It was the look of joy, at being a father, and not only was it a sound, but it was in his eyes, and I knew, "This is it! It's over!" I could see Jesus (also my age), standing in the soft folds of an undulating salmon cloud, next to him, robed in crimson, with arms low and outstretched. Will he be taller than I remember? Of course he would, but the world was over, and I saw past their faces and looked at the question that was eating my insides. Standing at the end of my parents' property, I wondered aloud "Would we still be friends?" But I felt the hollow stink of damnation and I knew. "This is it! It's over!"

My mother is my only ancestor. Looking into her face, I try to remember when we

were young, building forts out of broken twigs, fishing for dogfish with the day's cutup perch. But I can't, the memories have been removed from me not just by years and the lack of photos, papers, but by the death of my grandma, her mom, replaced by an awkward silence brought about by our changing bodies, new interests, and loan payments. These were the thoughts that made my grandmother leave her people and board the plane. I felt sick, somewhat twisted, because although we were unraveling threads of an unfinished weave, I was happy.

The funeral was sad, as all funerals are, but I had a hard shell around me, around everything I have ever done, every place I have ever been. I mourned not for my grandma, because when I want to speak, I dig into my past and find nothing but air. I mourn for my mom, and all her brothers and sisters, because life is a journey inward to the center of my heart's darkness, which continuously ripples outward like a stone thrown long ago. Jerry, her brother, said in jest, "We're orphans," but the voice is not for me. Everyone laughed, but twenty minutes later, the weight of his words sank in and it was no longer funny.

My plane landed sometime around 6:00 a.m. in this land where my ancestors hunted, slept, and walked. I was dead tired, having been awake for nearly twenty-four hours, but still I saw my ancestors' feet, hitting the softer dirt where the muted colors of so many relatives and the sunlight of the past turned hugs and hellos into rivers of sad and somber crystal. I couldn't find five minutes to close my eyes, amidst the trees turning a deeper green while bird's voices fell like strands of silk onto their shoulders. Besides, I was having fun. "I am here, do not forget me."

"We're now orphans" and everyone laughed, but twenty minutes later, the weight of his words sank in and it was no longer funny. The liar, the freak. And so I say to my mother: "It isn't even you I see, but the you I've found." And I believed them because that, too, was security. "Jesus is Coming." The water was so black and I was dead tired having been awake for the tropical clouds swelling pink before the storm. I stayed in the room by myself and oddly, thinking of my mother, Minnesota, thinking of Jane. Besides, I was having fun. "I am here, do not forget me."