

A Simple Act

for Denise Dorsz

Gourds climbing the fence. Against the rusted crisscross wires, the leaves are fresh. The green, ruffled plants twine around the wood posts that need painting. The fruit of the vine hangs in irregular shapes. Some are smooth. Others bumpy and scarred. All are colors of the earth. Brown. Green. Gold.

A gourd is a hollowed-out shell, used as a utensil. I imagine women together, sitting outside the tipis and lodges, carving and scooping. Creating bowls for food. Spoons for drinking water. A simple act—requiring lifetimes to learn. At times the pods were dried and rattles made to amuse babies. Or noisemakers, to call the spirits in sorrow and celebration.

I am taking a break from my hot room, from the writing, where I dredge for ghosts. The writing that unearths pain, old memories.

I cover myself with paper, the ink making tracks, like animals who follow the scent of water past unfamiliar ground.

I invent new from the old.

STORY ONE

Sandra

In the third, fourth, and fifth grades, we were best friends. Spending nights at each other's houses, our girl bodies hugging tight. We had much in common. Our families were large and sloppy. We occupied

places of honor due to our fair skin and hair. Assimilation separated us from our ancient and inherited places of home. Your Russian gave way to English. Your blonde hair and freckles a counterpoint to the darkness of eye and black hair massed and trembling around your mother's head. My blonde hair, fine and thin, my skin pink and flushed in contrast to the sleek, black hair of my aunts, my uncle, my father. Their eyes dark, hidden by folds of skin. We were anachronisms . . . except to each other. Our friendship fit us well.

We invented stories about ourselves. We were children from another planet. We were girls from an undiscovered country. We were alien beings in families that were "different." Different among the different.

Your big sister Olga wore falsies. We stole a pair from her and took turns tucking them inside our undershirts. We pretended to be big girls, kissing on the lips and touching our foam rubber breasts. Imagining what being grown meant. In the sixth and seventh grades our blood started to flow, our breasts turned into a reality of sweet flesh and waiting nipples. The place between our thighs filled with a wanting so tender, an intensity of heat from which our fingers emerged, shimmering with liquid energy, our bodies spent with the expression of our growing strength. When we began to know what this was—that it was called love—someone told on us. Told on us. Through my bedroom window where we lay on the bed, listening to the radio, stroking blonde hair, Roger, the boy next door, saw us and told on us. Our mothers were properly upset. We heard the words from them: "You can't play with each other anymore." "You should be ashamed." "WHAT WILL PEOPLE THINK?"

We fought in our separate ways. You screamed in Russian as your father hit you with his belt. You cursed him, vowing revenge. Your mother watched, painfully, but did not interfere, upholding the morality of the family. My mother shamed me by promising not to tell the rest of the family. I refused to speak to her for weeks, taking refuge in silence, the acceptable solution. I hated her for the complicity we shared.

Sandra, we couldn't help but see each other. You lived across the street. We'd catch glimpses of the other running to school. Our eyes averted, never focusing. The belt marks, the silences the shame, restoring us once again to our rightful places. We were good

girls, nice girls, after all. So, like an old blouse that had become too thin and frayed, an embarrassment to wear, our friendship was put away, locked up inside our past. Entering the eighth grade in 1954, we were thirteen years old. Something hard, yet invisible, had formed over our memory. We went the way of boys, back seats of cars, self-destruction. I heard you were put in the hospital with sugar diabetes. I sent a card—unsigned. Your family moved away. I never saw you again.

Sandra, we are forty-one now.
I have three daughters.
A woman lover.
I am a writer.
Sandra, I am remembering our loss.
Sandra . . . I am remembering.
I loved you.

We have a basket filled with gourds. Your basket is woven from sweetgrass, and the scent stirs up the air and lights on our skin. This still life sits on a table in front of our bedroom window. In late afternoon, the sun glances around the hanging plants, printing designs on the wall and on our arms as we lay on our bed. We trust our love to each other's care. The room grows heavy with words. Our lungs expand to breathe the life gestating in the space connecting your eyes to mine. You put your hand on my face and imprint forever, in memory, this passage of love and faith. I watch you come from your bath. I pull you toward me, my hands soothed by the wetness on your back and between your thighs. You smell of cinnamon and clean water. Desire shapes us. Desire to touch with our hands, our eyes, our mouths, our minds. I bend over you, kissing the hollow of your throat, your pulse leaping under my lips.

We touch.

Dancers wearing shells of turtles, feathers of eagles, bones of our people.

We touch.

STORY TWO

My House

The house I grew up in was a small frame box. It had two stories. My sister, cousins, and I shared a room on the second floor. A chestnut tree rubbed its branches against our window. In the summer, we opened the glass panes and coaxed the arms of the tree into the room. Grandpa spoke to the tree every night. We listened to the words, holding our breath and our questions in fear of breaking a magic we knew was happening, but couldn't name.

In our house, we spoke the language of censure. Sentences stopped in the middle. The joke without a punch line. The mixture of a supposed-to-be-forgotten Mohawk, strangled with uneasy English.

I was a dreamer. I created places of freedom in my mind. Words that my family whispered in their sleep could be shouted. Words that we were not supposed to say could be sung, like the hymns Grandma sang on Sundays.

The secrets we held to ourselves. We swallowed them. They lay at the bottoms of our stomachs, making us fat with nerves and itching from inside.

The secrets we held to ourselves.

The secret that my mom's father refused to see her after she married a dark man, an Indian man.

The secret that my uncle drank himself to oblivion—then death.

The secret that Grandma didn't go out because storekeepers called her names—*dumb Indian, squaw*.

The secret that Grandpa carried heart inside him clogged with the starches, the fats, the poverty of food that as a young man, as an Indian, he had no choice about eating.

All of us, weighed down by invisible scales. Balancing always, our life among the assimilators and our life of memory.

We were shamed. We didn't fit. We didn't belong.

I had learned the lessons. I kept my mouth shut. I kept the quiet.

One night in August, 1954, a fire in the basement.
Things burned.

Secret things.
Indian things.
Things the neighbors never saw.
False Faces. Beaded necklaces. Old letters written in Mohawk. A
turtle rattle. Corn husks.
Secrets brought from home.
Secrets protecting us in hostile places.

“Did you lose anything?” The neighbors stood, anxious to not know. The night air was hot. The moon hung full and white. The stars in a crazy design over us.

“Did you lose anything?” The question came again.

“Just a few old things”. . . and Grandma and Grandpa stepped into the house, led by my mother’s and father’s hands. My grandparents tears were acid, tunneling holes in their cheeks.

“Don’t forget this night, *kontirio*.¹ Don’t forget this night.”

Grandfather looked at me, the phrase repeated again and again.

“Don’t forget this night.”

Grandfather’s back became a little more stooped. He lapsed into Mohawk at odd moments. His heart stopped in his sleep. Heavy. Constricted. Silenced.

Grandmother’s back became a little thicker. Her shoulders were two eagles transfixed on a mountain, checked in flight. Her hands became large and knobby from arthritis. Still, she made the fry bread, the corn soup, the quilts, and changed the diapers of her great-grandchildren. She never spoke of that night. Her eyes faded, watery with age. She died. Her heart quitting in her sleep.

I closed the windows and covered my ears to the knocking of the tree.

In my room overlooking the back yard.

Through the open window, I smell the cut grass, hear gourds rattle as a breeze moves along quickly, bringing a promise of autumn and change.

I sit at the desk, pen in my hand, paper scattered underneath. Trying to bring forth sound and words.

1 wild animal

Unblocking my throat.
Untying my tongue.
Scraping sand from my eyes.
Pulling each finger out of the fist I have carried at
my side.
Unclenching my teeth.
Burning the brush ahead of me, brambles cutting across
my mind.
Each memory a pain in the heart. But *this* heart keeps
pumping blood through my body, keeping me alive.

I write because to not write is a breach of faith.

Out of a past where amnesia was the expected.
Out of a past occupied with quiet.
Out of a past, I make truth for a future.

Cultures gone up in flames.
The smell of burning leather, paper, flesh, filling the
spaces where memory fails.
The smell of a chestnut tree, its leaves making magic,
The smell of Sandra's hair, like dark coffee and incense.

I close my eyes. Pictures unreeling on my eyelids.
Portraits of beloved people flashing by quickly.
Opening my eyes, I think of the seemingly ordinary
things that women do. And how, with the brush of an
eyelash against a cheek, the movement of pen on paper,
power is born.

A gourd is a hollowed-out shell, used as a utensil.

We make our bowls from the stuff of nature. Of life.

We carve and scoop, discarding the pulp.

Ink on paper, picking up trails I left so many lives ago.

Leaving my mark, my footprints, my sign.

I write what I know.