

Ode to my ACEs¹

ANN TWEEDY

I count five off the list but of course
there are others, unlisted. The full ten
an artifact from a health outcomes
survey, done in San Diego.

Four or more greatly increases one's risk of some cancers,
chronic pulmonary lung disease, depression, suicide.

What have they given me and what
have they taken?

No one really knows if cancer was allowed
to flourish because ACEs shut
cancer-fighting cells off

or if they sped up my cells' aging so that my birth age
is less than my cellular age

but my fear of dire consequences and sense
of unloveableness are probably dead ringers

No. 1²

My father's humiliation—calling me unkempt,
apologizing to strangers for my knotted hair,
decreeing me “not dressed nice enough” for the church supper

No. 4³

The flashes of my mother's anger—how I hid in the stem
of the dining room table, waiting for it to be over.

¹ACE stands for “Adverse Childhood Experience.” Studies, including the original San Diego study, have linked ACEs to various health problems later in one's life. For more on the concept, see “What ACEs/PCEs do you have?” *ACES Too HighNews*, <https://acestoohigh.com/got-your-ace-score/>.

²“Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often . . . Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? or Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?”

³“Did you often or very often feel that . . . No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? or Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?”

And then my aftermath-response—
I didn't ask to be born, followed by her
Why are you torturing me?

My father's refusal to take me in
when DSS was investigating my mother
*You can go live with Uncle Paul--
you won't be out on the street.*
Oblique attempts to comfort.

No. 5⁴

It wasn't days-on-days of hungry—more a day here and there.
Not Richard Wright's cups of tea instead of food
but an oftenness of not enough food.
Then, in 5th grade, the terrible diet where you could only eat
one food per meal—like onions or potatoes.
Getting it wrong or breaking it and endlessly starting
the month-long diet over.

The news article my mother taped on the kitchen wall
about the woman accused of starving her intellectually delayed daughter--
my mother thought it was funny that my father thought
she was starving me. But I knew he would never
come inside and see the news clip. A house
defined by his absence. And hunger's humorlessness.

No. 6⁵

A custody battle that my father
waged but didn't want to win. A psychiatrist
arguing for me to stay with my mother.
A sense of my father's fatherliness as a blank,
almost a window you could see through.
The minutiae that were fought over including
whose church I should go to
until my mother was arrested for trespassing at hers
and I defected to his.
You don't know how hard I fought in court, she said.
A sense of myself as traitor to one side or the other.

⁴“Did you often or very often feel that ... You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? or Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?”

⁵“Were your parents ever separated or divorced?”

No. 9⁶

My mother's head so often in her hands I want to intervene now
whenever I see someone in that posture. My student, a friend once
when she was tired. The fears—of not being able to get out of bed,
of being laid off for slowness, of putting off job or housing applications
for months while I work up to them. Her conviction that people were stealing
our bank passbooks to get private information,
that police plotted to rape me so they could show she was selling me.

That dismal house a bastion of safety—how, by staying in it
you could ward everything off. The magic of
a house that could barely hold itself up protecting us.

“Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?”