

Words on Your 80th Birthday

The older I grow, the more I know that
Words truly are futile,
As there is so much I want to show you,
And so much I want to tell you.

I'd show you my mind's moving pictures
Before I sleep, and in dreams.
You, my sister, and some other medical resident's child you babysat for
Extra cash.
I came home in my jumper in a car seat,
Craning my neck from the back of Grandpa's sedan,
I saw the three of you,
Swathed in sunlight,
With tiny hands in a ring
Circling around and around the front yard.
The babies couldn't even form sentences.
Their parents came home after dark.

When my best friend came over to play let's pretend,
And you crept up the stairs to listen,
And to tell us to
Wash our hands for the tenth time,
I made a noise and then told her wryly,
“*She* doesn't understand.”
And so, we continued playing with
Dirty hands.

You looked at me in a way that sits in
The recesses of my memory.
You knew what I meant.
You understood
But you couldn't speak.

I wish you could have read me
When you found me crying at 13
A week before high school
About nothing at all.
And everything at the same time.

You told me,
“*Shake it off like a duck.*”
Those words didn’t work back then.
But I wonder if they worked for you
When you needed them.

At parties I don’t remember,
In the midst of sweaty bodies and foul shots and fruity vapors,
How disgustingly alive I felt for the first time.
Even if it was all fake,
I wish you could have been there to
Hear the floorboards shake.

I studied biology and anatomy, and
I wrote and wrote and wrote about a hundred
Red boiling soups on the stove, that stunk of home.
They greeted me on cold December evenings.
I can’t tell you how they tasted,
But I remember what they smelled like.
Japanese curry twice a week, just because I liked it
And nobody else did.

You made me write in diaries you bought me.
Eyes rolled up, I wrote
Letters to your own mother who went down
Long enough ago that all I can recall is the feeling
Of my finger when she shut it in the door.
And apologized with a smile
As you laughed and laughed.
First, second, third, and fourth
Generations of laughter and tears
About nothing and everything.

You left those letters on her grave.
You taught me what ovarian cancer was.
Without knowing how to say the word, “ovary.”

I was once told that as children,
You and your little brother were shy.
You hid under your blankets

When strangers came over.
I know how that felt,
But I also don't know so much
About you and what you felt.
Do you and did you feel
Regret?

When your childhood home went up in flames,
When your father's spirit left
And your mother's body wept.
When your husband saved you,
He brought you home
And then made the ceilings shake.
I imagine little boys and girls might have made faces
When you ambled by on American streets.
When your first son first cried
And your second son first lied,
What your hammer toes feel like walking
In shoes that have known
Two countries,
One and a half languages,
A black and white wedding aisle and cotton factories,
And the suburban concrete outside your tiny little house.

I wish words could mean
More than they do with you.
There is so much I'm yearning to speak about:
The ones who claimed to love me,
The books that saved me,
The songs that carried me,
And the memories that haunt me.

There is so much you'll never understand.
Just like I'll never comprehend what it's like to
Be you.