

THE FORTUNE STICK

by

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The Woman and the Boy Meet

Nora settles down in Tobor, Alabama, after several years spent far away. Traveling. She had been a nurse (and at times, an amateur actor), and could once go wherever she wanted, but now she will retire.

She has one major phobia—mice.

Her house is infested with mice. She doesn't think she can afford to hire an exterminator, and the mice are too smart for her traps. She needs help of a charitable nature, but doesn't know where to find it. She doesn't know anyone in town. She decides that the only way of inviting charity into her life is to show it to someone else, and so she invites all the children in her neighborhood to lunch. Only one child comes, and that child is named Joseph.

He comes at the urging of his family. His family knows that the house Nora now inhabits has a strange blessing on it. Joseph's grandparents once lived in the house, and they received good fortune from it—particularly in the form of winning a large number of contests, from Best Pig in the County to various local lotteries. However, Joseph's grandparents realized that the fortune wore off after the first generation. They realized this when Joseph's parents consistently came to no good, and Joseph's grandfather had a strange meeting with a ghost who explained the situation to him. If your parents are lucky and you are not, you begin to feel cursed even if you are doing all right compared to everyone else you know. And therefore Joseph's family now feels cursed. And Joseph is finally in a position to be of some benefit to them.

Joseph's family knows that Nora will come into a fortune of some kind, and they hope to be included. So they see this lunch invitation as a perfect opportunity, particularly since Nora (based on her response to their gentle questioning) appears to have no heirs of her own.

Maybe Joseph will make a good impression on her. He wears the nicest clothes he has to lunch, and he combs his hair, and he brushes his teeth seven times.

What if Joseph himself is the good fortune that the house has chosen to bestow on Nora? Impossible.

Nora in fact has children of her own. They are estranged, sure, but wouldn't she try to reunite with them before befriending a child who is a stranger?

Furthermore, what Joseph's family doesn't know is that Nora grew up nearby, and that relatives of hers once lived in Tobor, indeed, in the same finicky house that will now refuse to bless her because she was not the first in her family to live there.

Nora's mother grew up in the house as one of seven sisters. One of them was crazy, which will be important later.

When only Joseph comes to the children's lunch, Nora feels hurt and confused that her good will was largely rejected, but she still tries to entertain Joseph as if he were as important to her as a roomful of children.

"How long have you lived here?" Joseph says.

"I used to live here when I was a child, but I've been away for a long time. I've only been back for a month," Nora says.

"Where else have you lived?" he says.

"Many places," she says.

"Where exactly?" he says.

"Different countries. Canada, Persia, Russia, Hawaii," she says.

"Hawaii isn't a different country," he says.

"But it might as well be," she says.

"But Hawaiian men have fought and died for our country," he says.

"Does fighting confer belonging?" she says.

"Other actions confer belonging as well, but fighting for a cause or a country does indeed most certainly confer belonging to that cause or country," he says.

"Hmm...maybe..." she says thoughtfully as she bites into a deviled egg.

"Of course," he says as he reaches into a giant jar of cookies.

But all this is paraphrased. It might go a little differently. The point is, Joseph impresses Nora with his unusual perspective for a child of only thirteen. So they talk a bit more and get to know each other.

"Which house do you live in?" asks Nora.

"I live in the trailer next to the house with the purple fence."

"Oh. That house with the purple fence is very nice. It's on a lot of farmland. But you live in that rusty trailer beside it? The one with the three old boats out front? And the hubcabs? And the old rolled-up carpets stacked into a pyramid? And the piles of wood? And all the trash and everything?"

"You aren't being very polite," says Joseph.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I wasn't making any judgments about it. I was just getting my facts straight."

"Yes, that's the one I live in," says Joseph. "And I think it's cool. I can do whatever I want there. I help my dad when he does work for the people next door, and when he's gone, I get the place to myself."

"And no one tells you what to do?"

"Not very much."

"Does anyone make fun of where you live? Or are people around here used to places like that?"

"Yes, some people make fun of it," says Joseph. "They ask my dad why he can't just clean the place up, haul off the junk. But like I said, I like it just fine. But now that I

think of it, why should you think that ‘people around here’ would be used to that? You think there’s something wrong with us?”

“No. I suppose I’ve just lost touch because I’ve been away. I don’t fit in here anymore. People here seem strange to me, and I think I seem strange to them. I like books and opera and theater and jazz, and I write poems, and I think that people around here think there’s something wrong with me. They don’t know any better, though. I try not to take it personally. They’ve just never been exposed to any culture.”

Joseph thinks about the word “culture” for a minute as he chews at the skin of his fourth chicken wing. Everyone has a culture, don’t they? But he doesn’t want to have a fight about the issue since he already feels as if he’s been too argumentative during the lunch, and so he tries to forge ahead and change the subject.

“Well, aside from all that, how do you like your house here?” Joseph asks.

“It’s okay,” she says. “It has its disadvantages. I particularly hate the pests.”

“Do you think I’m a pest?” asks Joseph.

“Not at all. I invited you here.”

“If you invite someone, they could still turn out to be a pest. And maybe you already didn’t like me because I usually make so much noise.”

“I never really noticed that,” she says.

“But we’re very loud when we’re outside. We fix cars. We rev engines. We have water gun fights,” he says.

“That’s okay. I just meant I have mice in my house, and I’m afraid of them. I can barely sleep at night. I can’t afford to move right now, but if I could...”

“Where would you go?”

“Anywhere, I guess.”

“I could help you catch the mice if you want. I’m not scared of them,” he says.

“That would be neighborly of you,” she says.

As a reward, Nora offers to teach him to write poems. She offers to show him her poems for inspiration, and he agrees to read them.

Nora's Poems

Sacrificial

In the woods next door, my sister and I set up
daffodils in old coke bottles,
brushed off stumps for furniture
arranged dead branches into walls.

The next time we came back, the woods
would be woods again
and we began again, in the purple light
of the sunset that stuck in the winter branches
above us like the purple blood of that prince
who came to ask a small boy to cut off his head
and bury it so the famine would end
which happened in a story we read
but didn't like to talk about.

Once when examining mushrooms
we found a caterpillar turning his broad, fuzzy back
to many ants, and I thought he was too big to fit
into their mound with the ant-sized pits
but she said they would tear him
piece by piece until he fit.

She slid her popsicle from its stick
and set it by the ants, to distract them, but
they only divided their work
and swarmed both delicacies.

The Duck Daughter

The duck emerges and shakes its feathers, and the drops of water
on the grass bulge into cranberries.
Gather the cranberries and the duck.

And you don't have to wash the cranberries—they're born
clean, and you don't have to feed the duck, the duck was born
knowing how to eat. What could a duck teach your daughter?

You sew the feathers into a purse, make a clasp from the beak.
You don't eat the meat, but you eat the cranberries.
You don't eat the meat, but you bury the body.
You mark the grave, you light candles there.

The duck has a daughter. The daughter is a human girl
who wears a coat and hood of feathers.
Within the feathers is the flesh.
Inside the flesh is the heart.
In the heart is the cranberry—
which is curtained by thick red feathers,
which is occupied by several seeds,
which, if the duck could reach it,
it would eat.

How We Lost the Doll

Rust-hoofed Ford LTD
of my childhood, drive past
the natural daffodils
growing weed-like, scattered
on either side of the driveway
and help me to remember
the cracked blue eyes of my sister's child-sized
Cinderella doll, who smiled into the sun
until her blush faded.

I never moved to save her. I read on the stoop and cried
for the horse in *Animal Farm* who was fooled into glue
while my sister cartwheeled, ignored the her-sized doll,
and the thing stopped seeming to smile,
her legs crushed under a pogo stick.

That Halloween I was Lincoln, my sister
was Robert E. Lee, and the neighbors were glad
to see us acting friendly like gentlemen.
Before when we were princesses,
we were haunted by disaster—
the corn grew small, a tree fell on us,
we fell into the doll, fell out, fell back and forth
while the backyard was always planning
to imprison her shining feet, her slight smile.

Our Wedding Party

A small mistake, red icing
piped around the edges of the cake.
Our mothers say it's charming.

Cold night caught in the fingers of the giant
oak, old, it urges us to make
a small mistake, like red icing.

Wiping wet fingers on the tablecloth, my blind
Uncle Charles says the pies are underbaked.
Our mothers think he's charming.

Before wet stone eyes can even blink,
the day is off to a white start, but a day will take
a small mistake, red icing

smears across the window, glass sky
the eagles rub their beaks against and break
in to steal our mothers, perceived as charming.

Unarmed, the rest of the party starts to sing
in an eagle language our fearful thanks
for the small mistake, red icing
our mothers would have thought was charming.

A Few Questions

Joseph begins to wonder why Nora wrote these poems. Was the wedding Nora's wedding? Was the daughter a real person or just a metaphor? Was there really a giant doll that Nora once had? He wants to know the backstory. He runs over to her house and knocks on her door.

"Who is it?" she calls through the door.

"Joseph," he answers.

"I would like for you to visit, but I am busy at the moment."

"Busy doing what?"

"I am performing a mourning ceremony."

"What's that?"

"I'm expressing my grief for my lost loved ones."

"Like who?"

"My husband and children who are gone."

"Where did they go?"

"No one can say."

"Well...when should I come back?"

"Come back in half an hour. Since you interrupted me, I will have to start over. But the ceremony only takes half an hour."

"Okay," says Joseph. He sits outside on the edge of the porch and continues to read to pass the time. There isn't any furniture out there, and the porch floor isn't very comfortable to sit on. It's like a chair in the waiting room to see the doctor. But that's kind of the point. If it were too comfortable, his mind would start to wander. This helps him to concentrate.

Women's Studies

Women used to get up early
to fasten ribbons to the sundial
and thread needles with wild grass.

When husbands napped, the wives carried syrup
to the fields to bathe the crops.

At night, mothers gathered coal to fill
the shoes of children, who slept safely
in the bodies of guitars.

Young girls were trained
to stand on roofs during rainstorms
and sing to wet birds.

They buried dead husbands in the backyard,
squeezing lemons on the soil, forgiving.
Daughters brought horses to mothers,
showed them the saddle
and led them to the pasture,
but they didn't want to ride.

Raising Them

Daisies spray-painted at the grocery store
in a neon bunch wrapped in orange foil.
I buy this for my ailing pigs
and they eat it, foil and all.

I throw in novels, but they don't touch them.
The neighbors feed theirs
from the garbage can.
But I want to show I care; I put out varied side dishes:
turnip greens, squash, and knights and castles.
Beer and sake. Words of the day.

Why do they turn against you,
get so picky? If I reach in
to pet their ears, they barely care. Squeal halfheartedly
on the way to the hamhouse. Let's not be cruel
to ourselves – when we carry them to sell
to the fair, we'll set them in bumper cars first
and let them go wild, snort up ice cream cones.

Sick Dream

The three men with eye-slits
in their helmets were not all men
and when the arrows flew
the first man survived, somehow, with both his eyes.

The second was a mother with a kid (someone I knew
I would recognize on waking).
The third was me, though I watched the trial from far-off.
A trial, or it could have been a theme park.
Or it could have been a child's trap
because throughout the day, before the arrows,
there were playground obstacles:

a ropes course, a race, a swinging contest
to see who could kick over the plastic man
and send him tumbling back
to reveal a small spinner,
and whoever the spinner's point stopped
to point at would be doomed to die.

I won, and spinning, landed on the mother and when
the arrows were pulled from the helmets, and I wiped the blood away
and kissed the man I had saved, I saw her body lying useless there
and knew that the spin had not been pure chance.

Joseph's Cat

As soon as Joseph finishes reading the poem called "Sick Dream," his cat Mr. Squash wanders up.

"Hi there," Joseph says.

The cat sits beside Joseph and puts his paw on Joseph's knee.

"I'll come home soon, Mr. Squash. I'm just reading these poems. I just read a really creepy one. I don't think I really like poems. But I'll keep going. Dad and everyone think I should get to know her, you know. And maybe this will expand my mind or something."

The cat starts to walk away, but Joseph grabs her and pulls her back.

"Hey, wait a second," Joseph says. "Here, I'll read them to you."

My Daughter, an Extra in Many Films

My daughter was born at the wrong time.
She would have thrived in the Silent Era.

She was sixteen when my husband disappeared.
My son was fifteen when my husband disappeared.

It didn't make any difference. Before and after,
she was silent. She left when you entered the room.

She talked to me on trash—teabag covers,
popsicle sticks, yogurt lids—penned notes like
“The bread is stale.” Or “Take me to the doctor.”
Or “The dog is cold, buy him clothes.”

And this went on for years.
She never had a normal way of speaking to me.
I don't know much about her outside habits.
She kept apart from me.

But I've seen every movie she's appeared in,
all twenty-three. In some as part of the crowd at a party,
in some as a woman in a bar who acts bored
by the male lead. Three times she has spoken on screen.
Once as a salesgirl, once as a mannequin, once as an orderly.
She was very good. I believe she chooses not to play the female lead.

My Son, the Troublemaker

When did the trouble start for him?
When he was thirteen, he took scissors
and cut up all his clothes. He scattered the scraps
throughout the garden in the backyard. I found buttons in the weeds
for years. For years, even in different gardens
of other yards, for years even after he was gone.

And before, when he was even younger, he took a kitchen knife
and stabbed the flour sack, and the sugar sack, and the gallon of milk,
and the orange juice carton, when I was at work.
When I got home, they were all bled out. He said he was sorry
when I complained about the mess, but he tried
to convince me it was all an art project.
At the time, I think I believed him.

Dogs

The neighbor's dog is practically dead
sleeping in the middle of the road
(is he dead or does he sleep?)
Roll down the window of the car and shout.
Some things get past you
some intruders, some large cats,
and he might be ready
to let it get away and not worry about it.

But isn't this reckless, lying in the road
just asking for it?
The neighbor's kids are indifferent
inside, I know, watching Friday Night Smackdown,
and if they knew of this behavior
by their pet, whose name is Butterbear,
whose breed is indistinguishable,
I doubt if they'd even be concerned.
The eventual men in them are comforted
by something that tells them the whole world
can go to hell, and not to get too attached.

When I was a kid, there were many times
one neighbor's awful German Shepherd
came to me where I played and called
its high stiff bark, and flung its body at me,
and bullied me back home, and sometimes
dogs will do this—
assume the worst,
assume the world is theirs.

Lloyd

“Hey Joseph.”

“Hey Lloyd.”

“What are you doing?”

“Reading these poems the lady inside gave me.”

“Weird.”

“What are you doing?”

“Just looking for you, I guess. I was going to see if you want to go to the creek with me.”

“I would, but I told the lady I would knock on her door again in half an hour. Do you want to go in with me? We could read this stuff together, and then I wouldn’t have to go in alone.”

“Uh, nah.”

“But...”

“I’ve got to go. Thanks, though.”

Lloyd runs off towards the woods.

Joseph pats Mr. Squash on the head and continues to read aloud.

Kitchen Haikus

Crumpled paper bags
on counter, onions inside:
stroke their cold, white skins.

Mechanical bird
my sink, vomiting beak my
spigot, useful tail.

Running burn under
cold water, painful doctor,
I visit myself.

Neighbors buy French white
tea, organic beans, such
clean scrubbed emerald mugs.

Peeling cucumbers,
think of progress, of process,
syllables and song.

Mop in bucket, I
meant to put up; the creek floods
away those small frogs.

TV on softly
violin murder music,
polish the counter.

Spread butter onto
the soft damp jonquil petals—
morning looks like that.

College

I would rather be taught in a dream.
My daughter asked me once if fish dream
and I said they dream about swimming,
but that was a guess.
The truth is, we don't know. Do we?

With all we know now...
and once I even worked in a lab, watching to see if worms
would commit suicide under the influence of anti-anxiety drugs.
I counted the bodies, the bodies in motion, the bodies at rest.

In the morning of knowledge, professors sleep late
and their assistants count them. Count them caught up
in the sheets, breathing raggedly. Their heads are stars
and spiders spin webs from star to star, making patterns
relevant to spiders: the great spider hunter, the great sleeping fly.

When the professors rise, the webs are broken.
Every day, the patterns change. The professors
are hardly afraid. They know what they know.
They say:
to be afraid to know is unmanly.
I say:
to be afraid is to know.

And I know the unproven things.
I know that if the crocus won't grow,
try crumbling the bulb in your hand
gently, like the head of someone you know.

I Got My Start

When I graduated, I took on fussier projects
such as the splintered hind-half of a bee that stung
Helen Keller, and often
I was asked to reprise the role.
Then soon I sold long plastic fish in a story about hope
in a small town, where the men can find no work
and so I give my fish away to them in secret baskets.
I am an angel (last minute discovery). Cirrus in my eyes,
hair shredded in the halo cap.
Remember, too, I was in that musical with the ghost town
and the group of thieves who banded together
to fix the place up and market it to lonesome types
and then found themselves falling in love.
I was one they fell in love with,
and I had my own song, and I had my own surprised gasp
when I saw the clean white planks
one thief used to build a fence around my house.

The Sentence

Michael, what will they do with you now?
Now you have sat in the dungeon for months
without a pair of socks, without a pack of gum
your girlfriend stranded
without a date to several potlucks.
My only boy

did you read the book I sent
about Dutch tulips, full of pictures
to look at in the dungeon?
So many colors, those flowers.

You had every advantage.
Why did you take that ice pick
to the place where they train seeing-eye dogs?
You must have known what would happen.

But still we stand by you, or rather
outside the courthouse, we mourn
our abundance, we stand here on the shore
eating rare, grilled sandpipers
skewered with toothpicks and served
in glass cups. We toast
each toast to you.

Maybe you can hear us
in some way, though you tore
your eardrums with cotton swabs
though you shut up your heart
and your mind is on business.
Tell the judge whatever
about me, if it helps your appeal.

Manners

My husband said he would have told me sooner
and I nodded, knowing the rest, and pulled the plate
of cold corn from the refrigerator.

It takes a different kind
of corn to pop, the rhododendron opening
fluffed and intricate like an old-fashioned wig
or a large growth on the skin.

“Cut this boil off!” one patient begged me,
and I told her the doctor would come see her directly
which I never would have done when I was younger.
Say whatever to shut people up. Give the children
what they want, a candy bar, some rocks to throw at squirrels.

Visiting

Joseph feels rather confused by her poems, and he does not exactly enjoy the experience of reading them. He feels as he did once before, a few years ago, when he had gotten to school very early one morning and entered the classroom to find his teacher slumped over at her desk, crying. He had frozen on the spot and not known whether to leave or to stay. At the very least, he should have gone to sit at his desk and pretend to do his homework. But he just stood in the doorway and pivoted, first looking at her, then spinning around to look at the clock, then spinning around more to glance out into the hallway, and then returning to stare at her and shift back and forth. She finally noticed him and arose, and walked past him out of the room. Joseph was relieved but troubled. Perhaps he should have said something, asked what was wrong. When class began for the day, she tried not to look at Joseph. In fact, she tried not to look at him for the rest of that, his fifth grade year. His grades that year were not so good.

After Joseph feels that half an hour has passed, he knocks on the door again, and this time Nora opens it.

“Did you finish?” asks Joseph.

“Yes, I have to do it again in a couple of hours, though.”

“Why?”

“Ours is not to reason why. Ours is but to do and die, into the valley of death.”

“Okay. Can Mr. Squash come in, too?”

“Yes. Who is Mr. Squash?”

Joseph holds up Mr. Squash.

“Yes, that’s fine.”

On Nora’s table, there are several pieces of paper covered with writing from another language, a language that consists of strange and beautiful characters.

“What language is that?” asks Joseph.

“What?” says Nora.

“That writing there. What is it?”

“It’s what I wrote under the influence of the spirits. That’s part of the mourning,” Nora says.

“What spirits?” says Joseph.

“When I do the mourning ceremony, I ask the restless spirits to enter my body, and then they write through me and tell me things I need to know to solve my problems,” Nora says.

“Would you like some lemonade?”

“Yes please,” says Joseph.

They sit quietly at the table for a moment while Joseph drinks his drink. Mr. Squash hops onto the table, but Nora brushes her off.

“So, can I ask you some questions about the poems so far?” asks Joseph.

“How far did you get?” asks Nora.

“Up to the ‘Manners’ poem,” says Joseph. “I don’t understand, though. What did your husband tell you?”

“Oh, dear. I didn’t know I’d included that poem. See, that confusion is part of the poem. The mystery. What did he tell me? If I tell you, it’ll ruin the mystery.”

“Oh,” says Joseph. “But I guess he’s gone now, or you wouldn’t be doing the mourning ceremony.”

“True,” says Nora.

“And the poems about your daughter and son...where are they now? Is your son still in jail? Did he really pick all those dog eyes out?”

“Oh, dear.” Nora begins to tear up.

“You don’t want to talk about it?”

“Not really. Not beyond what I said in the poem.”

“Well...sorry all that had to happen. So your son’s still in jail? Is he somewhere around here?”

“No. Nowhere around here. And he’s not in jail right now.”

“Then what happened to him?”

“No one knows,” says Nora.

“No one?”

“No one.”

“Where’s your daughter?”

“No one knows.”

Joseph swirls the last bit of lemonade around in his glass and watches it spin.

“So...” he begins.

“It’s just a mystery,” Nora says.

“Like the Bermuda triangle?” Joseph says.

“Indeed,” Nora says. “But even if you don’t have any mysteries like that in your life, you can still write poems. Joseph, I want you to try it. It’s the only thing I can give you. Please, just try writing some poems. And then bring them to me so I can help you with them.”

Joseph agrees to try and to come back when he has something to show.

Joseph's Poems

The Ramp

My mom got down with sickness
and my dad and I put up
the wheelchair ramp—one that came from a giant box,
and it took us weeks to assemble.

When she died, we never put it up.
I race electric cars down it
with Lloyd and other kids.

I've skated down it.
I've ridden up it with my bike
into the living room.

I know a girl who rides a wheelchair
and have thought about inviting her over.

Christmas

Coming out of church on Christmas evening
when the gun I won that morning keeps
cackling in my mind, and there is a fizz
like soda alighting on my heart, until
my dad reminds me to thank my grandma for her present
which was dress clothes to wear when I visit you.

The forest is encroaching on the fields, have you noticed?
Deer are emboldened, though now with my gun
I can alter that.
I wish I could build my own house in the forest
and given the peace I might get there, I wouldn't be scared
of the dark, or other hunters, or the beasts that stalk.

Pen Pal

Assigned to some kid named Gunther from Potsdam, Germany.
I describe my cat, but I erase it. I start to write
about the stuff we do at school. I mention how my dad
lets me ride my bike out of town
and I'm the only kid who can.
I ask about music where he is, about the sausage.

My teacher told me that Potsdam is where Truman
met Churchill and Stalin, after Roosevelt had died.
Then Truman dropped the bomb. Churchill—
he looks like a nice man, a giant baby.
He reminds me of myself. I wonder how to take all this
and tell him what I mean, but then
he might not know much about American history.
I drop the subject. World war. Seems like a rude thing
to mention when speaking to a German.

Just think of Odin (known by many names, as
Skollvaldr, lord of treachery, and Friggjar,
one who lives in Frigg's embrace)
who formed the world from scraps
of the body of the frost
and waits for Ragnarök, the final days
when the gods are supposed to pass away.

Written Outside

I might run out of things to say soon.
Right beside me, the fish spill
from the cooler like too much gold.
Most died on the walk home, but two
are still wagging their tails, and look mad.

I borrow a special knife from the dad of my friend Lloyd.
I clean out the skin. I clean out the guts. I clean out the bones.
From the porch, the dogs run down to chew off pieces.
They eat the coils of glowing, weirdly lit-up skin
and I know that inside them, the glow spreads out
and then everything unwinds and is dull.

That House I Envisioned

I think somehow we are living in that house
I dreamed, where I saw us hiding from intruders,
us hiding behind presents,
Christmas presents, I think, mostly unwrapped
in the middle of a large-scale operation
which I might have been responsible for.

It felt like either heaven or hell—I think it started
as one and changed in the middle
to the other, and the intruders were not
ordinary villains, but they were
fearless and unkillable and armed.

And I was miserable. That house was where
I had owned all the things I've wanted—
collections of weapons, and of animals, and of empty rooms.

Concerning Joseph's Poems

"How are they?" says Joseph.

"Well," says Nora.

"So they're not good?" says Joseph.

"I'm thinking," says Nora.

Nora is quiet for a long time while Joseph swirls his hot cocoa around in a mug made to look like the head of Yosemite Sam. He tastes the cocoa from time to time, but it is a little soapy, and it soon grows cool.

Finally she speaks.

"What do *you* think of these poems?" she asks him.

"I think they have their charms," says Joseph.

"Such as?" she says.

"A certain rustic flavor. A refreshing honesty."

"I see," she says.

"You don't like them?"

"I'm thinking," she says.

Luck

One day when the boy is visiting Nora, he decides to confide in her.

“Have you ever thought that maybe...” begins the boy.

“What? Spit it out,” says Nora.

“Well, the thing is...you know how I watch wrestling on TV?” he says.

“Yeah. What about it?” she says.

“They have girl wrestlers, too.”

“Oh? And you like them?”

“There’s one I like. Her name’s Bullerina...she’s the one with the pink dress and the tattoos of flames on her chest.”

“I don’t think I know her. But go on.”

“I had this dream last night that I asked her to be my girlfriend. I know it sounds dumb, but the show was in town, and she turned out to be just a kid like me, and she was really smart, and she knew how to use a tractor and take care of cows, and she liked to read all the books I like to read, and I could beat her at wrestling.”

“That sounds good, I guess.”

Joseph nods. He looks down, studies a potato chip and says nothing for awhile. Nora continues writing out checks to pay her bills. Joseph usually drops them off in the mailbox for her on his way home.

“But Nora?”

“Yeah?”

“The thing is, I really wish that could be true.”

“About the girl?”

“Yeah. I want her to really be all those things. Do you think something like that could happen to me someday?”

“Those things happen to some people. Maybe you’ll be lucky. Who knows?”

“Were you ever lucky?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where’s your old husband? The one you had your kids with?”

“I don’t know. I can’t stand him. Or maybe I’m just saying that to make myself feel better. Maybe he really can’t stand me. And if so, I wouldn’t blame him. Women in my family can’t keep men around.”

“You said that you’d tell me one day about the aunt of yours who used to live in this house.”

“Did I say that?”

“Yes, you did. You said you had a really weird aunt who used to live here. I’d like to hear about her.”

“Are you sure? She wasn’t a pirate or anything. Not a wrestler, either,” says Nora.

“Don’t be patronizing to me, please,” says Joseph.

“Okay then. First of all, you have to know that my aunt had a mental problem.”

“Go on.”

“She just had some kind of problem. I don’t really know what it was, because I only heard about it from my mother, who barely knew anything about it. No one liked to talk about it much, apparently. And my mother was the youngest, and for almost all her life, her sister was in an institution, and as she got older, my aunt didn’t come for visits very much anymore. She tried to escape once, and they didn’t let her out much after that. It’s kind of an interesting story.”

“Was she dangerous?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then why did she have to go away? I thought you had to be a danger to yourself or others to go to an institution.”

“I’m not really sure about that.”

“Was she at Bryce hospital in Tuscaloosa?”

“She was. What made you think of that?”

“I’ve just always heard about it. I don’t know about anyone else who’s gone there, though. Does it scare you to be related to someone who was crazy?”

“Why would it?”

“You know.”

“In case it means there’s something wrong with me, too? That might be kind of interesting.”

“It would scare me.”

“Well, then let’s not talk about it anymore”

Joseph agrees, but the next day when he comes to Nora’s house, he helps her clean out an old desk, and in a drawer there he finds a strange collection of poems, and he is sure they were written by Nora’s aunt. He decides not to tell Nora right away about what he found, though. He doesn’t want her to think he’s very nosy. And besides, he wants to read them all for himself without any adult censorship.

The Aunt's Poems

Telling the Story

That one might feel
compelled to tell
though it could be
irrelevant
to say what has not been
progressive.

To explain: I don't know anything
about the certain trajectories
I've lived, passing through everything
simultaneously
and cruelly, like weak paste when you pour too much on a page
soaking the project through.

In stories from Ireland I've read, they say
the fairies could replace your good child
with a child who is sick or dead, a fairy child.
Or a replica of a real child. Or a shade of skin
that covers some heretofore unknown creature.

What is it like to be inside us?
Think of the man whose spirit was infected
by the spirits Christ sent to join the pigs.
Are pigs as easy to steer as I am?

A Few Thoughts on my Condition

Am I one of those fanatics who objects to the word
“mad”? As an insult, no, but as a medical term.

It wasn't a kind of madness that made Persephone
go down into that place, because she couldn't help it.
The flowers started growing lower to the ground
and she was set to follow them, and so
she followed them until they grew inside it.

Or think of someone good like Don Quixote.

Or the monster in *Jane Eyre* was well-behaved enough
to attract a man, and then out of nowhere—a loose tongue,
rape cry, moss lips, dirty hair, suddenly was different?
I hope it's not like that.

I don't know, but that rolling over us each night
swan-shaped spirits hover and tilt wings
across our collar bones as we sleep.
Some leave promptly when we wake, and some
sit and lower claws into our chests
and clear out a place to lay eggs.

Two Outings

When I first met my sister.
When I first imagined white pearls
and August ducks pillowing
when we walk together and the film burned
a hole in it or something, the man in the booth said
it wouldn't play, so we would have to go back right then
though we'd come so far in the cold
and I was looking forward to it, although
there are many hours in a day and it might only
have worried us all somehow. What my sister said
was if only my mother, my father, had lived for me to know them

when she didn't know at all what to do, and told me stories
though most likely I invented it. And then I remember
reading who is my mother and who are my brothers, those
who do the will of the Father, and for me there is the matter of
what you do with what you have done to you
the way the crowds part and how
we wouldn't have done anything bad during the movie
or bothered anyone at all.

Trip Home

Taken back for such occasions,
the carving out of the nation.
Look out the window of the train and see flags flying
wars and rumors of wars, woe to them
who give suck to child in those days, not me though.
Sisters back home, their husbands
pace between the kitchen and yard
holding horseshoes to throw, and I
make potato salad. Every year.
And all the children are afraid of me.

Though it's good to have a job here
even cutting and boiling water
and gutting and mashing
news, new jokes I've heard
while preserving the dignity
of my station
chatting, and crumbling bacon.

No one's slept here in my old room
I can tell – the same old pillows
and my papers and personal effects
my jewelry box, things too valuable
to have taken with me.
And here my sisters' extra things are kept
some boxes, and fabric for dresses.

Reflections Thus Far

“This is very sad,” says Joseph to Mr. Squash. He has taken to reading poems aloud to Mr. Squash. “This woman is very troubled and has received very little sympathy from those around her.”

Mr. Squash leaps up and then settles back down against the last column at the edge of Nora’s porch. Joseph has taken to reading poems on the edge of Nora’s porch out of habit.

“Come to think of it, maybe I am also troubled and receive very little sympathy from those around me,” says Joseph.

He tries to think deeply into this matter, but so many thoughts fly to him at once that they seem to make a loud rustling sound, as many birds do when flying together, and this distracts him, and he finally (though somewhat vaguely) thinks that everyone is deeply troubled and receives very little sympathy, but then a moment later he feels he has gone too far.

“But I don’t understand the actual circumstances of this woman’s life. What happened to her mother and father? Who did she visit when she went home? How old was she when she entered the hospital? None of this is clear.”

Joseph falls silent for a moment. It doesn’t bother him if other people hear him talking to himself (it is a harmless quirk, he thinks), but if Nora heard him, she would find out that he had these old poems, and she might be angry with him. But Joseph now knows no other way and no other place to read poems, so he figures he has to risk it. He sets his mind on the troubled aunt once again.

“Maybe she didn’t intend the poems to be a record of her life in a historical sense. But I don’t know. And then again, what if Nora just wrote them herself? She writes poems, and I kind of doubt there would be two in one family who did.”

Joseph studies the handwriting and the ancient appearance of the manuscript, but he knows how any document can be forged. He decides to read on, and to continue to consider whether the poems seem to have a Nora-like quality.

First Arriving

I. Two Beds in the Room

I don't care about the end of winter.
Trees mutter in the yard.

Things go wrong and maybe you have to think
the explanation matters.

Ellen sleeps beside me
doesn't tremble. I think there's something
she needs to tell me.

II. The Knitting Club

Meets on Tuesdays. I work a little
at odd times
during the week, nap periods
or at night, though
it's dark I can still see
well enough. You don't even have to look.

Flute Recital

I did learn to play the flute there. And I played
I have forgotten now with my hair twisted up like a crown
and played very well for a beginner, everyone said.

The cracked cornets are pins
to curl my hair, emit a loud cry now and then taken
up by my body when sounds are surfacing tadpoles
growing legs, and eyes that puff and narrow
when I am feeling very much
how diligent this feeling is. It is written
Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted
with evil, neither tempteth he any man: but every man is tempted by his own

lust, and I was finding myself finding out
what to take for a *painless* death
as Socrates said
it isn't death you need to fear, because of what comes after, and even if
you don't believe in that, he said
he's known many men to call the best times
of their lives spent
in a dreamless sleep, and I agree, those are promising options.

I should have been proud of the little concert, because you might not know
the flute when played by a sensitive player
can render the most delicate emotions not brought out
by deeper, larger instruments, and even my instructor
who was very tough praised me to an unusual degree.

Under the Bed

They look there, too. The piano is open
for the evening, and everyone is waiting
for me to play my little songs.

Let us sleep late on holidays.
The vines' warm tongues like lapdogs'
when all the evergreens dress up the building.
Not bad like you might think.
Hang ornaments on the giant tree.

Out the window, frost and birds.
Dust and smoke from the furnace.
Quieter, though, when some are gone
and the screams from the other ward sound closer.

Dreams

1.

The chair-sized eyeball closed like a fist.
I nudge with my elbow, open slightly
and the iris is radiant and red.

I kiss it, bad idea. But I can't help it.
And its gluey film sticks
to my lips, and I gag, and it cries, and bounces.

2.

Forgot to stitch up a hole in my dress. Three ugly looks—
one from a nurse, two from friends.

I wanted to change or stitch things up
rapidly, but sitting through the whole bridge game
that day was strictly mandatory.

A Little Romance

After dinner, we can skip the Music Hour
and take me to the birdbath in the back and kneel.
I lay my twilight cloak against your knee
pulling the stars out of joint.

Why should I do that?
In prison, the tunnel is made
of the undersides of shells.

I want to pass through with assurance.
I want to pass holding on to your drawings
wearing a white fur coat and cap, fussed up and packed.
My roommate Ellen first saw the young girl
ghost laughing as she tried to lead her to the children's section.
She told us later she died in an operation,
a feeling like clots of quarters falling from her ear.

You know several magic tricks, but who taught you?
Destiny brings together communities full
of different kinds of talents.

Joseph Meets the Ghost

Joseph has good luck when it comes to strange occurrences. Often something will happen to him that is so strange, he thinks he must be dreaming. Once, for example, he was thinking about his music teacher, who earlier that day had informed Joseph that he should just mouth the words when it came time for their annual choir competition.

“I wish I could punch Mr. Hardingflower’s face in,” Joseph had said to his dad as his dad drove cautiously down Main Street, alertly preparing to turn onto the road that led to their trailer.

Just then, Mr. Hardingflower passed them in the opposite lane, riding a unicycle.

It was known to the boy that Mr. Hardingflower didn’t live on their side of town. He could have been searching for Joseph, maybe to apologize?

Joseph rolled down his window and whistled. Mr. Hardingflower was startled and turned around rapidly, causing him to lose control of his machine. The unicycle and Mr. Hardingflower fell. It looked painful, but Mr. Hardingflower was not seriously injured. Joseph found that out the following day when he arrived at school, and Mr. Hardingflower had only one arm in a sling (not even a cast), plus a couple of bruises and gashes. Nothing serious.

Joseph’s dad hadn’t waited around to find out if he was okay after the fall. He drove home very rapidly. Mr. Hardingflower didn’t even know that it was Joseph who caused him to fall, but Joseph knew that he somehow suspected him. He became even ruder to Joseph than before. Since then, Joseph has often wondered whether he could forgive him if he knew, if human feeling can be worked upon and enlarged just as competitive eaters train their stomachs to expand with pounds of grapes and gallons of water. Mr. Hardingflower is not a man with a very wide capacity to forgive. He knows so many are out to get him. It is a consequence of being an excellent music teacher, one who wins nearly ever choir competition in the state.

The unicycling is still a mystery. Why then? Why there? Just when Joseph was thinking of him, hating him?

This is an example of Joseph’s relation to unusual occurrences.

Now Joseph is meeting a ghost, which cannot be easily explained.

“But I thought you died at the asylum,” Joseph tells her.

“I did,” says the ghost, who is rather horrifying. “But ghosts, you know, can travel anywhere.”

“But why did you come to my room? Why would you want to wake me up and scare me like that?”

“I wanted to make an impression on you. I need your help, and I need you to maintain a consistent belief that I am real, and a feeling of terror lest I ever visit you again.”

“Why would you want to inflict terror?” says Joseph.

“I don’t want to,” says the aunt. “But I will do what I need to do.”

“I would have helped you anyway,” he says. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to go to Nora’s house so you can locate some of my old possessions and burn them,” she says.

“What kind of possessions? Why can’t Nora do this herself? She’s the one who’s related to you.”

“I am sure she won’t do as I ask. She is very strong-willed, and she likes to keep everything. I can’t risk it.”

“Why don’t you burn them yourself?”

“I can’t bear to. I’d never go through with it. Only you can help me now.”

“Huh. I think I know what it is you want me to burn. But I already found it.”

“What?” The ghost shivers. “Then you are cursed. I put a curse on it.”

“I don’t believe in curses,” he says. “And why would you curse your poems? What’s so bad about them?”

The ghost appears relieved. “I am not concerned with poetry. I am speaking of some inventions of mine that must be uninvented. I left them in the attic the last time I visited the house. I didn’t want someone who worked at that place to steal them. They’re in an old, gray box, which is sitting in an old, gray trunk.”

“What is in there, exactly?”

“I can’t tell you. If you see it, you’ll be cursed. Just burn the box. Make a fire in a trashcan or somewhere safe, and then drop the box in, and run away.”

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you or anyone. I should never have imagined those things. But I demand that you do as I say. Burn them, and don’t touch them. Or there will be serious consequences. I will return to make sure you have followed my instructions.”

“But wait!” Joseph says.

“What is it?” says the ghost.

“What is it like after you die?”

“I’m not allowed to say.”

“Why not?”

“For four reasons,” she says.

“Reasons I can’t know?” he says.

“Right,” she says.

“Why do you think, though, that everything has to be a mystery?”

“You at least know that I am here. After death,” she says.

“I don’t know if it is really you. I never knew you,” he says.

“But it is something,” she says.

“Yes, it is something surprising,” he says. “Rest assured, I will look for this box. I will go now, and if I don’t find it, I will be both relieved and disappointed that it was all an illusion.”

The ghost nods and disappears.

Joseph reflects on the appearance of the ghost and how hard it will be to destroy such a mysterious box without succumbing to the temptation to open it.

He is also unsure whether the ghost means for him to complete this task immediately, or if he is to wait until his next natural visit to Nora’s house. Since the ghost has succeeded in terrorizing Joseph, Joseph will not get any sleep tonight anyway. He also does not want to risk the ghost returning to him, so Joseph decides to sneak out. Nora has often told him of her idiosyncratic habit of rising at 3 a.m., unlocking the door, and then returning to bed, all with the purpose of allowing the paper boy to sneak in and place her paper on a small table near her door. She hates nothing more, she says, than venturing out for the paper in her pajamas, or than getting ready for the day without reading her paper. This, she says, is an oddity she allows herself.

Joseph decides that the best course of action will be to slip out and wait for the 3 a.m. unlocking. He figures he has an hour or two to wait, so he brings his flashlight and the

remaining poems by Nora and her aunt that he has left to read. At this point, he loves to hate the poems. They are depressing, but in a pleasant way, like sitting on the school bus and staring out the window when it is raining, and the fog obscures the town and the townspeople, and everything seems like part of an uneventful dream.

Nora's Poems

Mirth

Small change, loose lemons and brown pears
in my pockets. To toss at girls
with eyes like velvet radishes.

To toss into makeshift fountains,
gray rivulets falling from the royal blue gutters.
Sit on the porch and toss
and toss, making subtle wishes.

Wish for citrus weather. To be a strong man.
To invent expensive medicines.

No, I will use all my wishes
against envy. To disembody it, to chip
its marble umbilical cord.

Black Pool

People tell me about a black pool
just off a hiking trail nearby, the blackest
black, and naturally
I ask if it's run-off from coal mines
or a dump for a chemical plant,
but they tell me, "You must never
confuse its beauty with a pollutant."

They say it is like a mood ring stone
when your hands are cold,
a shining, obfuscating black
the government will investigate,
in the meantime everyone says
I should hike out and see it.

I say I will.
I don't even like regular lakes
or the moon or fireworks
lakes sometimes reflect.

But still. Out there – the cool,
the dark marble lake:
it could be fuel for a spaceship,
or a home to albino fish
and plants the color of glow sticks.
I could fall in
and, open-eyed, sleep.

The Third Seal

And the third seal broke open, and one guy wrote a story about the perfect place to eat wings, with thick red curtains surrounding every table and two TVs for each table, and a visible staircase where women lean against rails and are lonely, and wait until the feast is over and don't speak to each other, and dogs eat all the bones and the waitresses are delicate, but laugh at every kind of joke.

And one girl wrote about the perfect place to die in your wedding dress, with your new husband petrified of your disintegration, feeding you ornaments spooning white frosting and pink flowers into the new porcelain teacups you received and setting them out for you and your final visitors, and you have many chances to swoon and come back, to thank everyone, thank everyone for coming, for the presents, the kind words.

And stories come into a time of lowness, grow paper legs and throw themselves onto caskets before the dirt grows over them or else are read at funerals as evidence of the author's dying good ideas and good will, aspirations for a better tomorrow.

What about the word abyss?

Who could forget it? The night came on that way.
The fish shrugged out of their scales.
The mermen were left by the mermaids.
The men I threw into the abyss
stayed, sat on the floor of the dining room
with no furniture, pizza boxes,
and said that no one even says
abyss anymore, and left me
by myself in the drawing room.
But is it there anyway, unnamed?
Into what am I throwing these things—
the sunset, the surgeries, the scaffolding?
What could hold everything?

Luck

Joseph finally hears the door unlock. He waits a few minutes for Nora to return to sleep, and then he goes inside (just missing the arrival of the paper boy).

He finds the ghost's trunk easily. It is unlocked. In fact, the box is nothing more than very old, dusty cardboard. It is taped shut. It would be very easy to open it. If he drops it, it might even fall open.

Joseph knows he is going to look before he burns it. He is not sure if he believes in curses on objects or good fortune from houses. He wonders if he should believe. There are some things he believes in. He has never looked askance at the act of believing in something extrasensory.

And it was the ghost who told him not to open it. The ghost. What are ghosts capable of? Are they corporeal enough to hold a knife or a chainsaw?

It is a risky gamble either way. If he doesn't look, he could lose a marvelous invention. If he does look, then...well. He decides the decision is too big for him. So he wakes Nora.

"Nora?"

"It's night!"

"Nora?"

"This is unsettling."

"It is."

"Why are you coming to my room? Why would you want to wake me up and scare me like that?"

"I need your help, and I need you to believe what I say."

"Fine," says Nora.

"I was visited by a ghost."

"Yes?"

"The ghost of your aunt."

"Heavens."

"Yes. It was alarming."

"What did she say?"

Joseph holds up the box.

"She wants me to burn this for her. And not look at the contents because they are cursed. But I really, really want to look."

"What is in it?"

"Inventions."

"Of hers?"

"Precisely."

"I already opened it," says Nora.

Joseph gasps.

"It isn't cursed," she says.

"How do you know?" he says.

"I guess I don't."

Nora agrees to show Joseph the contents of the box that very night. He agrees to ignore what the ghost said.

“When you opened the box, did you recognize the inventions?” he asks.

“Yes. They are catalogued on a sheet of paper at the bottom of the box. They’re kind of fun.”

“If you say so,” he says.

There are three objects in the box. Nora makes him guess what each one is.

One is a milky, opaque orb, which is the size of a baseball and looks like a giant, living marble. The surface of the orb is a pale pink color streaked with swirls of pale purple. Joseph imagines that this is the eye of Pegasus. Then he guesses that it is a Christmas ornament. Then that it is something to tell the future with. Then he guesses that it is a giant marble.

Nora shakes her head. “What this is, if you can believe it, is a parent test. It tests to see if you are in the presence of your birth parents.”

“Oh...”

“And you are not. It turns bright blue when a child and the child’s birth parents are both in the vicinity.”

“Oh...”

“Yes. I tested it out on several neighbors. I put it in my purse and went around to several houses under the pretense of delivering gifts of baked goods. It worked every time. The orb, that is.”

“That’s strange,” says Joseph, and he feels somewhat sad.

“Yes. She must have felt quite strongly about locating her parents. Unless she had some altruistic interest in helping others determine paternity and maternity. But that’s not very likely.”

“No. Probably no one could create a parent-finding magic ball unless she was really invested in the project in a personal way.”

“Well anyway, let’s keep going.” Nora pulls another object out of the box, a piece of leather headgear (one that looks like an old-fashioned football helmet) with black disks attached to five points on the head. Nora tries it on to show Joseph what it looks like. She says the disks are magnets.

“Is this to cure mental illness?” he guesses.

“No.”

“Is it to cure headaches?”

“No.”

“Is it to enhance psychic abilities?”

“No.”

“Is it to help you make decisions?”

“No.”

“Is it to help you communicate with others through your thoughts rather than in words?”

“No. I’ll tell you what it is. It is a dream harness. It is supposed to absorb the dreams you dreamed the previous night, and then reposition them into your conscious mind.”

“Hey! That’s kind of cool. Could I try it?”

“You can try. From what I can tell, though, it doesn’t work.”

Joseph tries it on and lets it sit on his head for awhile, but nothing happens. He even tries to remember the dream he was dreaming before the ghost interrupted him, which he vaguely thinks had something to do with being a caterpillar. But nothing really jumps out at him. He decides to set it aside and examine the next object.

“What is the last thing?” he asks.

“This is the most important thing for us,” she says. “That’s why I saved it for last.”

“Okay,” he says.

“Once I show you what this is, you will have to make a very important decision.”

She pulls the object out of the box. It is a wooden stick covered with writings from an unknown language. The words look like scales on the back of the stick.

“Is it an alphabet of an imaginary language?” asks Joseph.

“No.”

“Is it a way to ward off evil spirits?”

“No.”

“Is it a religious object?”

“No.”

“Is it from another country?”

“It doesn’t say. I don’t know how she got it, or if she perhaps made it herself.”

“What is it?” Joseph is nervous. “Tell me, please. I can’t guess anymore.”

“It is the source of the blessing on this house. Her notes verify the legend that is passed down in your family. The first inhabitants of this house receive good fortune, but then the good fortune wears off after the first generation. And as you know, once good fortune wears off, whatever you are left with will feel like a curse, even if it is merely normal fortune.”

“Why would she want a stick like that?”

“I think she was hoping for some good fortune. Even if future generations couldn’t share in it. Even if they had to suffer a little as a result.”

“That seems harsh.”

“Yes.”

“But she did have a hard life.”

“Yes.”

“But if it didn’t give her good fortune, doesn’t that prove that the stick doesn’t work? Besides, the dream thing didn’t work,” he says.

“Well, for one thing, I guess it all depends on your definition of good fortune. Also, there could be some loophole that the inventor of the stick doesn’t share in the good fortune. And from what I understand, your grandparents came into vast sums of money, lived exciting and satisfying lives, and then it was all gone by the time their children were grown,” she says.

“True. But now she wants me to burn the stick. What would happen if I did?”

“According to her notes, you will be retroactively reversing the fortunes of all who originally received it. And as a result, things might change for their descendents. That means you and me,” she says.

“How can it change things for people who are already dead? Can it go back in time or something?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” she says.

“How would things be different for you and me?”

“Oh, the possibilities are endless,” she says.

“Well…” he says.

“Well, why don’t you think about it all?” she says. “Go home. Make a list of pros and cons. Sleep on it.”

The boy goes home, but he can't sleep. He's restless, and also somewhat afraid of the ghost's return. His father isn't home to catch him, so he sneaks back out with Mr. Squash to sit on Nora's porch. He has some more of the aunt's poems to read. He hopes to learn more about what could have caused her to invent the fortune stick, which might aid him in his difficult decision.

The Aunt's Poems

The Movies

They decided to screen them privately for us
and we saw so much that year
enough to keep us considering and coming back and back
to familiar actors, we began to recognize
and the acorns fell and cluttered the sidewalk while the girls, we
talked and swayed thinking about first this one with slicked hair
and that one with fine thick legs and funny expressions
and then the pink worn eyes of Sarah who senselessly cut all
her nice auburn hair away, gave her ribbons away
to the first girl to get a date for the dance that week, and of course
I had a standing date with Tom to go anywhere.

And that was a good time of year, a good set of things
to look back on. I tried not to pay attention,
my visitors said not to pay attention
to what I thought I thought
about their intentions, so I let that go at the time.

The Quest

How will I find my parents again?
I will search the seaside. The springs.
The docks. The ponds. The docks.
What did my mother do
for fun? Wasn't it she who
had the fishing rod and kept it
under my bed, snuck it out to use
every day, at dawn?

My friend Martha has a vision each night of the trees wet
in a rain of afterbirth, and the grounds crawling with bits of people
trying to reach the door. I always tell her not to worry what it means,
that if she's supposed to know, she will find out eventually.

Escape

Pricked by the outer ring of bushes;
the gate I slipped through, a cockroach
bowing its head under the door.

This is the way to the park
and to the pond, the duck pond
with some families and solitary walkers,
and I summon up tears, and pose

as a destitute mother with a job at the real hospital
whose hands were cut when pressing
wet cloths to the heads of sick children
who bit me while dying, and no one questioned
my story, or minded when I asked to borrow
money for the train trip home
to visit with my own dear children.

Whatever you think
I had no other way of earning,
and I saw this as a sign
that from then until the end
the ravens would bring me bread.

Dreams

1.

I am packed in the center of a globe. A cardboard smell.
Girls outside play that game
where they spin the globe until their finger lands
on the spot of their future honeymoon. When they hear me call
they get their father to get his saw.

2.

I crawl into a room full of everyone I've known
and try to go unnoticed. The children on the floor
draw many turkeys, sweet potatoes, casseroles
and cut them up, and spoon the paper strips into every cupped hand.
Into mine, too.
I want to be grateful but have to shake them off
to lean out the window and vomit quietly.

3.

I eat ice cream in the dining room with Tom
and another man arrests my arms
accuses me of double-timing,
slaps me.

The Raccoon

Joseph pauses. He hears a sound like an animal rustling in the leaves. The sound gets closer and closer, and he hopes it is Mr. Squash. But it turns out to be a raccoon.

“Hello, Mr. Raccoon,” says Joseph.

“Hello, Joseph,” it says.

“Where are you doing up this time of night?”

“I do everything at night.”

“You are nocturnal?”

“Yes, usually. What are you doing, Joseph?”

“I am reading these poems by Nora’s aunt,” says Joseph.

“I see. I know Nora well. I have snuck around outside of her house and snooped in her garbage.”

“Oh? And what do you think about her?”

“I think you had better be careful around her,” says the raccoon.

“Really? Why?”

“She has strange ways about her.”

“Is she a witch?” asks Joseph.

“No, I don’t think so,” says the raccoon. “Just the same, I do not think she is what she appears.”

The raccoon scrambles up on top of the porch and comes very close to Joseph. He grabs Joseph by his shoulders. He shakes him. “You’re not paying attention! You’re not getting out of here! Listen to me, kid. I came to warn you,” says the raccoon.

Joseph is frightened by the clawed grip of the raccoon. He tries to curl up into a ball, and the raccoon finally releases his claws from Joseph’s shoulder and runs off.

Joseph shivers for quite some time, and he considers running home and never coming back. But he feels he can’t ignore the decision he must make about the fortune stick.

He returns to the poems. He is growing weary of them, but he is almost finished, and he is looking forward to the satisfaction he will feel when he is done, when there is no more to read.

Knoxville

I mention my cousins' names, and
no one has heard of them.
Alma, Elsie, Margaret, Sam.
This is where they live
and send birthday letters.
I've always known that—a new
place to stay if I needed it.

No one knows them
or has anything to give away.

Should I write my sister?

The fair is here, the giant pumpkins,
types of pie, and nice, clean pigs.
A man has me taste some elixir.
He says, "Don't worry,
this isn't so big a place;
you'll find the folks you're looking for."

Dream

Walking over hills in Virginia, a rabbit decides to accompany me. The ground seems lower than my feet. I'm thirsty.

The rabbit is black and his eyes are turquoise. He wears a collar. I pet him and read the tag, which says

“Beloved Pet.”

I pass a cave, and the rabbit gets excited. Starts to speak in a sound like rustling silk

and I know what he means. I run into the cave

and look deep in and find my parents, but they are changed—

a thin appendage hanging from their foreheads—

a translucent limb, and at the end, a soft green wart of light.

Idea of Redemption

Through the planets, the light can't move.
The cosmology of the ancients is easy to reassemble.
First I watch the goddess of endings, holding quintuplets
which are identical stars against her five shoulders,
and she pats them until they burp. This is the way
to the god of the miserly. The miserly, who burn
one candle, and use the waning candle to light
another candle, on and on as they read, so they won't waste matches.
What do they read? The back of a book of matches,
by which I mean me. I am the product of a hotel in northeastern Tennessee.
Stolen from the doctor's office. Stolen from the lawyer's office.
I am haunted by the god of the miserly, who is not a god at all,
but a doctor. And yet I want more doctors, more parents. Who would make me whole?
I begin to stir.
I need a new cosmology.

April Poem

Light fish bone, the lilac
tumbles with the swift weight of April,
lodges behind the chest of drawers
and begins to smell.

A bad smell?
Barely. Settles in the corner,
mold forms on the petals like sores
on the woman who bled for twelve years,
who touches Christ's cloak
in the press of the crowd.

In April, the grass digs its roots
dislodges bug nests
and there is no more excuse
like the cold for feeling bad.
Have to try something.

Try accepting the mess
of shoulder blades,
the dark hazard
to spin into peppermints.
To read more into things—
fish for symbolic fish,
certain petals to pick.

The Face of the Ghost

Joseph tries to compare the image of the ghost to the poems the ghost churned out. Based on her last poems, the aunt seemed to have been at peace in the end, Joseph thought. But if she found peace in her death, she wouldn't have really come back as a ghost. From what Joseph can gather, the aunt gave up her search for her parents, and maybe she came back to help others give up meaningless searches. Maybe she thought Joseph was searching for something meaningless. But then again, the ghost might not be telling the truth about anything.

The ghost had been horrible to look at. It had a skull's face, and flowing brown hair with two large pink ribbons in it, and it was wearing an old gray-brown dress with little brown flowers on it. Its hands and feet were only bones.

Somehow, he can imagine that ghost sitting down with a feather pen, scribbling everything out. But still, he has a bad feeling about it.

Turned into Various Bugs

Like the ant, to be single-minded.
Like the cockroach, to be endearing.

Hardened in the novelty sucker,
the centipede, the tongue that sprouted legs.

Pinch up the larvae
when it rains on the nest, and relocate

without feeling any different. Reform thyself
snail and rhinoceros beetle. Don't be so

ancient. Forget your old embarrassments
and forgive the blunders of instinct.

*

Some rare figures were left behind, and some were taken
to rotating exhibits, and for some of these
excessive dusting caused the covering to crumble
and the spirit went stumbling off, back to the parking lot.

*

Don't think you if you are
hoping there is no afterlife
the steam puffs up
and wholly disappears.

This is a petrified world—
the books about books
about the tongue as coal.

Don't come see me at the museum.

*

Forgive the maggot if he burrows
in your old avocado. Into that cool

pit of your hand, swimming with unspun
solids, served like bread in buttermilk.

The body sifted and unadorned
and more than that.
The imprint of intuition, fossilized.
A hardened grain
of a compound eye.
Teach me with multiple legs
to bury in sand but expect to come back.

The Leviathan

I would like to dream I scaled the throat
of the leviathan, from a ribbon tied around his tooth
and swam off to Nineveh
where the lions go, with Eliphaz the Temanite
friend of Job, to whom
the waters bring vineyards and orange scones

but still bring sadness.

Can't escape that, the only fish
whose throat is cathedral-sized
whose stomach is hospitable, whose scales
are pride, who obfuscates the water
and has one white eye inside him.

Stuck deep as you are
you can still hear the sound of water
down its throat, watch the eye blink
as the beast swallows more to wash over you
there in its velvet red pouch.

And still, I don't know the way
of the leviathan, and haven't seen the place
past which it goes no further, where it sinks
and fizzes in the water, and the water there
is roped off, the place unraveled from sight.

The Sun Rises, and Joseph Writes Stuff Down

It begins to get lighter outside, though it is still chilly. Joseph reflects on all these poems by the aunt. He feels definite confusion about the story. She seems to have escaped from the institution, but she doesn't explain how she got back there in order to die there. And something in particular seemed to occupy her mind in the end, based on the last couple of poems she wrote, but Joseph can't exactly put his finger on it. He hopes that the aunt didn't really turn into the ghost. He hopes the ghost is lying.

Joseph decides that this might be a good time to write some more poems of his own to show to Nora someday, when the time is right and the ghost trouble has passed. He suspects that Nora won't really stick around for very long, that she won't be happy staying in one place. He wants to learn more from her before she leaves, in case she has something to teach him.

Joseph's Poems

The Birth Serpent

He is not the one who turns into a prince.
He is not at the center of the spiral.

I was born in the woods in a treehouse
while outside skulked the limbless dragon,
the giant serpent. My father built the
leopard cage, the leopard cage in town
to keep the high school mascot.
My father built the treehouse in the woods.

Everyone in town, born in the woods.
The serpent said, unhissingly,
he would watch us.

My father was afraid of the serpent. My mother was afraid;
myself, within the innards, deep within the sponge of sleep,
myself unborn and silent, was afraid.

That monster at the end of the world
some sailors said Columbus would fall into
was real after all. I don't mean America.
I don't mean terror. I only mean
no one is mistaken. The serpent is there.
You were born in the treehouse. Do you remember?

After Milking

Fighting dogwood branches with splashes of milk
I feel the spit drops of night.
What I mean is, fireflies.
And I drop my warm pail a minute
to try to swat them down
and swing them back up like my hand
is a thrasher and they are husks.
Milk the cow firm just like that
or you won't be able to get on with it.

Farm Work

Salted herring, putrid gruel—
we have a silo-full,
and igneous neighbors
and a Swiss mountain dog.

If the gourd vine like a virus
wraps among the fat beans
I get blamed. I get blamed
if the peacocks forget
to breed. Young robins peel black
beetle eyes and laugh like coconuts
dropping onto rocks, and I mean
them to, and I wheedle
the wood nymphs
to dress and undress.

Asking for Advice

How do you know when you're ready?
I had a dream about a fourth or fifth cousin of mine
(who was born long ago, accustomed to working
on more rustic farms than mine) and he turned out
to be a magician. He turned me
into an unborn calf, and put me into the dark red darkness
where I couldn't remember my friends, my human mom, or even you
(yes, I tried to remember you then, too), and I tried
to be scared, but I wasn't.

Until he birthed me out, and it was fearsome then, though now
I know all about it and can help the pregnant cows,
and my dad can't figure it out, and I'm scared to tell him
how I came into that knowledge.

I would give it all up, you know
the people and the good times
(the kindnesses, the cartoons, the fights)
to be back up there, in that quiet
and to be always quiet, until I am ready
for a change. I want to be the one
who initiates the thing.

The Calendar

Some stars are worth ten thousand suns.
The Mayans had a solar and
a sacred cycle, which you may disregard.
But if they could predict eclipses,
why not fortunes, too?

Did they know their cities would be lost?
No one can predict how much he will lose—
they would think you were insane
if you knew how much! In the course of a day
sometimes you forget that the one you loved
is prophesied to return.

There might not be a code to show us the way.
Can knowing help us forget it?
When I imagine the prophet of the apocalypse
I think of a monster with flesh like bubbling lava,
orange and gray. I imagine being in church and my mother
slipping in the back door, clothed in different clothes
than she was buried in, and the monster burning up the pulpit
and my mother hovering in the aisle beside me
not saying a word, but certainly calm
since she won't have to lose her body again.

She is not afraid for me through all the terror
of rare celestial alignments.
This must be a good time not to be afraid.

The Boy Meets Some Opposition

Joseph returns to Nora's house as the sun is going down, and he tells her he must burn the box full of the stuff, and he must do it now while he has the resolve.

Nora makes a fire, and gathers some marshmallows to roast in case anyone asks them what they are doing, making a fire in the backyard for no reason.

Joseph is very serious as he places the box on the fire. He says, "Wherever you are, I hope you're happier now that the fortune stick is gone."

"I'm sure she will be," Nora says. "Fortune is better when it comes more naturally, as a byproduct of something else. As fire is to smoke, so is hard work to good fortune."

Joseph nods, and he and Nora toast marshmallows over the fire.

Then Joseph is very frightened, as he sees the ghost again, lingering miserably over the fire. She cries over it, and her tears appear to increase the intensity of the fire. Finally, she reaches in and pulls out two things: the orb that detects parents, and the head harness that is supposed to extract dreams.

Joseph watches her as she blows on the objects to cool them, and then she hands them to Nora. Nora drops them. They are still hot.

"Try to patent these for me," the ghost requests. "Burn the fortune stick, but keep these. They did important things for me in my lifetime," she says. "I want to leave them as a legacy."

"I'll do my best," says Nora.

"But alas, my request might be in vain."

"How so?" asks Nora.

"Because once the stick is finished burning, things will change. The past will have been slightly rewritten for you and Joseph. You won't remember the way things used to be. I can't tell you things then, because I will be gone. I will be somewhere else, not here."

"Then that must be for the best," says Joseph. "Don't worry."

"But more than that," says the ghost, "You won't remember my having ever been here. You won't remember a lot of things. Things will be different."

The ghost grows dimmer as the fire increases, and soon she disappears. And as she disappears, Joseph and Nora begin to grow sleepy, and they fall asleep beside the fire.

When they wake up, the two inventions are on the kitchen table, and Nora and Joseph are sitting in chairs at the kitchen table, and there is no trace of a fire outside.

But the ghost was wrong about one thing. It is true that Nora does not remember what has happened, and in fact she is quite confused by the presence of the inventions.

But Joseph remembers everything. He tries to jog her memory.

She is suspicious. She believes the two things on the kitchen table belong to Joseph. She is concerned about Joseph.

Over the course of that new day, Joseph finds out that the mice are gone—or rather, that they have never been there at all. There was never any children's lunch because there was no mouse problem. Nora never married or had any children, so her children never stopped speaking to her.

Mr. Hardingflower is Nora's boyfriend, and Joseph first came to know Nora through him. Joseph was introduced to her at a choir competition as Mr. Hardingflower's best student. Joseph has a beautiful voice now, but he is not proud of it. He hates it.

Nora is his piano teacher.

She worries that a carbon monoxide leak in the house caused them to fall asleep at the kitchen table that way. She repeats and repeats her misgivings about the orb and the harness. Joseph tries to show her what they do. This time, the orb does not work, but the dream harness does. The orb is blank now, like a TV screen that has been turned off. It can't tell one thing from another. But when you put the harness on your head, you see things very vividly, and you immediately recognize them as things you have dreamed. When Joseph tries putting it on, he briefly lives inside a former dream about wearing a bear costume and travelling down the creek on an inner tube, sipping a juice made of mint and raspberries from a mug shaped like his own head. This is some consolation.

Another change is that there are no more poems now. The aunt's poems are gone, and so are Nora's, and so are Joseph's. Joseph's were never written, because in the other world, it was Nora's poems that inspired him to write—he had wanted to write better ones than hers.

Joseph decides to make a project out of reconstructing the poems by all three of them. He shows them to Nora and tries to explain where the poems came from, and she cries, and she begs him to desist. She says that she has seen the terrible consequences of insanity. She says that she had once had a serious mental problem and almost died in a hospital. Nora says she would hate to see the same fate befall Joseph. She tells him that she will make them some tea, and then they will discuss things that Joseph thinks he has seen. They will hide the inventions. They will keep everything a secret.

Joseph agrees for the time being, but he decides to devote his energies to escaping from this existence and returning to his former existence. Although it will certainly take some effort, he is confident that he will find a way back.