

SANDY SHREVE

Between Sisters

- for Carolyn Shreve

"... *Memory*
is the simplest form of prayer" - Marge Piercy

This poem is like a photograph
places you on the page
the way in my family album
I can always find you smiling
stretched out in your pretzel way
on a patch of lawn hedged
with wild roses

Its limits are simply your giggle
a lens of memory that insists
on territories of joy

an afternoon in the shade
of pink petals
arranged against too much pain

δ

I wanted
only gentle memories
to tiptoe in from the margins
a warm shawl
for your shoulders

as if I could caulk each verse
like winter windows
against the cold

δ

At eight, I dream myself Annie Oakley
dressed up in fringed vest and skirt
saucy hat dangling
cap guns strapped on
all set to tackle the world

You watch me pretend
I'm the fastest gun in the west
Resting there, your hands
a world of movement
unsolicited as the curious question
what would you do with them
given the chance

A photo holds you high in our father's arms
you are Zorro at last
the cape kisses your ankles as you dance
tickled pink with that new sombrero

the camera catches your face
tipped back to the sun for joy
saviour of the poor and unfortunate
who would make the mark of Zorro
without a sword

δ

I dreamt cerebral palsy could be cured
so you could live with all my possibilities

imagined I would be the one
to discover that magic moment
of transformation

holding you, toes to the floor
Walk, you can do it!

Mum, come look, Mum! Carolyn
can walk now

δ

You hold the chalk in your toes
race wild lines across a small board
propped up at the end of your couch

Intrigued, I try to imitate
place a crayon between my toes
twist myself into position on the floor
my foot poised at the page
aims and makes one faint orange stain

I give up on this quickly
return to the gift of agility in fingers

You mutter something like frustration
so I come over, reach past
your foot scrounging in cushions
to retrieve your chalk for you
to place it back between your toes

that will not grip what I give
At first you chuckle
as over and over again the chalk just drops
into the soft folds of the blanket

I persist until finally you tire of teasing me
kick at my hands, order
Nnnh! g 'way!

the look on your face defiant
at my young surprise
that this you will do
for yourself

δ

Echoes of children's voices
like rocks from slingshots
hurtling through time

What's wrong with her?

shatters placid afternoons

δ

Carrying you, one room to another
breakfast to bedtime
your so small body
stiffens horizontal in my arms

the spasms just happen

two skinny teens
one athlete, one atrophied
we make our awkward way
across the floor

into a moment when the spasms lapse
I ease you upward
nose to nose
your arms a sudden necklace
and we hug, ooo squeeze
tight, love
delight
upon my cheek
the softness of your lips
oh, sister, your gentle kiss!

δ

Talking about someone unpopular
*Oh, Mum, you wouldn't believe
he's such a spaz!*

Mum's rage at this language
rises like a wall of ice between us

the world stops in that kitchen

we are two statues staring down tragedy

δ

I spoon filling into cream puffs
delicate pastry faces
smudged with custard
No amount of practice
can get it right, each time
the perfect pace
the proper portions, change

There is nothing to do
but change the pace, the portion
scrape from cheek and chin
what the mouth must spit out
and wonder at your patience
with a lifetime of this
the food, the spoon
on your beautiful
translucent skin

δ

The truth is also full of fury
written in the indelible ink
of tears at a table
of frustration
the failure of love
what it cannot overcome

δ

You open the codes of your surroundings
to thread connections
the way you unravelled Acadian words
spoken around you in your new home
for the convenience of keeping secrets
without leaving the living room

secrets you would press to your heart
like flowers in a diary
until you translated some surprise or other
could not contain excitement

stitched the room with the calligraphy
of your laughter
their amazed faces staring

the air a tapestry
of all your precious petals

δ

I used to decipher your words
the cropped curves of their sound
familiar as family
though when you chased new shapes
from your tongue
syllables would collide with air
collapse in your laughter
at my absurd guesswork
until finally I'd get it
that, or they'd dissipate
with a final shake of your head
tired of trying to reach me

Each visit is a crossing of years
a whole continent
stretched thin between sisters

Talk falters
as if I've got cotton in my ears
Someone intervenes to translate
returns to me your vocabulary
fills me in on the details of your days
as you lie there, listening
on the alert
for absolute accuracy

δ

Doctors are not gods

but if the obstetrician
had heeded our mother's words
your birth
would not have been breeched

I wonder if afterwards
though he never spoke to our mother again
I wonder if he ever learned
to listen to women

δ

You have finessed the medical profession
took to heart the challenge
of whispered warnings predicting death
at two weeks, two years, puberty
certainly thirty...

as if to declare
*there's more to me than meets
those specialists' eyes, more than
the most severe case of cp they've seen
so get out your textbooks
and write up an entry on me
it's time to tell the world
I'm alive!*

*Sandy Shreve is the Departmental Assistant for Women's
Studies at Simon Fraser University. Her poetry collections
are The Speed of the Wheel Is Up to the Potter, Quarry
Press (1990), and Bewildered Rituals, Polestar Press
(1992).*