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Lady

A Sequence of Poems

Lisa Ventura

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of the
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Rest Stop

We hoarded all those minutes, chasing
Happineses that weren't ours, until we found
Nostalgia in our pockets—
Handfuls of perpetuum we didn't recognize.

Words Like Fire

Formed from a single cell,
I tell me what to do and I follow—
Right from wrong,
Treasure from cherries.

I have kaleidoscope eyes
And independence for arms
And all the words left behind
By their nameless lives.

When it's bedtime, I always plead for one more bedtime story.
But when I close my eyes and dream
Words like fire, free like horses,
I find a new place I've never been.

The world I've imagined won't survive past morning, when
I wake up to a brand new sun
And those dust fairies
Floating through the air.

Each morning I run out to catch the bus
And I let the front door shut knowing
Who I can be someday
Who I can be someday.

Dandelion Medicine

Mom sits at the table looking at
Pieces of paper that have pretty charts on them.
They tell her that her blood is wrong.

I give Mom a dandelion to cheer her up
But she doesn't look at it.
I tell her
Mom,
I gave you a dandelion.

She takes the dandelion
And goes upstairs to her bed.

While she is sleeping I put dandelions all around her.
She looks peaceful and
Beautiful.

I go back downstairs and look at the pieces of paper.
I pretend that they are about me
And not about Mom.

I am dying.

Lady

The dogs that have no owner throw sticks for each other to fetch.
I like throwing sticks,
Wagging my tail—
I can fetch things too,
Like when Mom is making Leslie's birthday cake
And she needs an egg from Mrs. Morrison
—Karen, if you please—
And I have to look left and then right and then left
Before I can even think of putting my toe on
The pavement because Daddy says so.
I fetch those eggs like a professional egg fetcher.

The dogs that have no owner run where they want to and I watch.
Even though Mom is in the sunscreen battle with my shoulders
My fur will protect me—
I bark to the dogs and they seem to understand
I roll around because there's no leash to stop me
Except for my mom's sighing complaints
That the washing machine will be very upset with me.

At dinner at night I use a knife and fork
And say "please pass the cauliflower"
While Daddy cuts my porkchop into little squares
That are perfect for slipping on the floor
When no one is looking.
When I am excused, I watch Lady and the Tramp on the VHS player
Because Daddy showed me how to work it yesterday
But I have to be very careful.
Mom yells at me from the kitchen
To turn it down because she's on the phone and she can't hear
Herself think and I guess it's her own fault if she wants to miss the spaghetti part.

I figure that I am Lady, but the Tramp has all the fun.

Rhonda

I count her steps—one, jingle, two, jingle,
Until she stops at the bottom of the staircase
And I wait for the jingle fireworks as she
Fits her key into her mailbox and persuades it to open
Pausing to catch the eye of the man that passes,
Her lips in that shape that looks like a smile but
Doesn't show any happiness.

I open Mom's drawer and find Rhonda's secrets.
I climb on the counter so I can see my breath on the mirror,
And I put the blue powder on my cheeks
And the red tube on my lips
And my purple Sesame Street boots on my feet.

I slip my wrist into all of Mom's bracelets that I can find.
I yell to Mom in between my counted jingly steps
That I am at last ready to go to kindergarten
And I stand out on the sidewalk waiting for men to look at me.

After a Long Day at School

Sometimes I feel that darkness growing inside of me
I feel it growing as my body grows
That loathing of my entire being—
My entire existence.

While I am here,
They are talking, laughing, crying,
Becoming and doing something
Worth being and doing.

I don't want it to haunt you like it haunts me.

Skipping a Whole Day of School

I had a fever, but I told Mom
The bigger problem is that my bones aren't working today.
She told me yes they are,
And now will you please take your amoxicillin,
The horrifying, deathly poison.

I stood on my chair and told her
I am the King of England
And I only drink chocolate milk.
She gave me a look that told me
My feet do not belong on furniture.

When I finally agreed to medicine torture,
Mom took out her pills too.
Hers are colorful, and one time I asked her
If I could make a necklace with them,
But she said no,
Even though there were enough to make necklaces
For all of my stuffed animals.

She follows the instructions that are too long for me to read
And looks out the window at something
Too far to hear and too close to remember.

The Sun-watchers

There's a hill on the other side of that place with the rows of statues,
The *cemetery*,
And on nights when the weatherman says it won't rain
An old man and an old woman
Climb up the hill (the Do Not Trespass sign is not very scary-looking)
And sit on the foldup chairs that are always on sale at Walmart
And watch the sun go back to its home.

I don't know why they find it so interesting.
It will happen again tomorrow.

When I try to think of things that don't change,
I count to only two fingers:

1. The sun
2. The sun-watchers

The Jungle

I wish I had those cheetah eyes
That can see the antelopes from far away.
I would hunt my prey
Stick my bottom in the air
Wave my tail back and forth
And count to ten before I jump on Leslie
And pretend to eat her ears.

But I stop
Before she can cry and call Mom
To come and scold me for
Acting like the rest of the world.

I pace back and forth on this couch that is my cage.

The Week that Mom Cut My Toenails Too Short

When she needs a new shirt,
Mom takes me to the mall,
That place where I am too hurried along and
Don't have enough time to be ready to look at the next stand of
Perfectly clothed dolls.

I lost Katherine last week when I went to the park.

I wish someone
Would take Mom from the park
And leave me Katherine.

When my lips were formed
They didn't know they would say these words.

When I Had Lost 5 Teeth

Mom bought me my very own address book last week.
I ate my peanut butter and jelly sandwich with not too much jelly
And then I carefully wrote
1941 Rockville Road (Caroline's address) and
(505) 331-6500 (Caroline's phone number)
Even though I knew them in my head.

I called her but she didn't answer.
So I told her answering machine that
She is my best friend
And would she like to come over tomorrow?
We can eat fish sticks at 12:15,
The time that we both agree
Is the best time for lunch.
We can also ride bikes in the driveway
And pretend we are on Mars.

Would she please call me back soon?

At the Hair Cutting Salon

Mom decided that today was the day my hair was too long.
I sat patiently next to the ladies with globes on their heads.
One lady complimented me on my hair,
And I politely told her
Thank you. I grow it myself.

She had painted fingers and was holding a small address book,
But she probably didn't have Caroline's address.
She probably didn't have Caroline's phone number either.

I watched her when I was waiting for
Cameron to wash my hair, for
Alice to cut and dry it, for
Mom to write numbers on the pieces of paper that turn into money.

The lady kept turning the pages front to back,
Back to front,
Reading numbers that she didn't call.
I went home and Daddy pretended not to recognize me with my shorter hair.

How to be a Mailman

Our neighbor Nate comes over
When he gets sick of his
Dog that has one eye
Barking at cars that have their rain wipers on.
We like when he comes over.
Sometimes he brings his Buzz Lightyear toy.

Once we played house
And convinced him to wear a girl hat
Even though he was the dad and the son and the mailman.
He delivered our mail—
One colorful piece of paper with cars on it
And two bills that we threw away.
He was the best mailwoman we ever had.

Occasionally he is over when it's bathtime
And we play princesses without our tiaras because
Mom likes to sometimes make life less fun.
We saw Nate has body parts that we don't have,
And Laura thought it was maybe because he
Lives in a different house.
Mom didn't seem worried that we would catch it,
But every day we checked our pants anyway.

Words Summoned Against Their Will

I had a dream last night,
And it was not a very nice dream.

I learned our bones were made of rain
And they found us splattered on the pavement.
We danced back into the clouds,
And Mom drifted to sleep in an open window.

I woke up and I was still at the hospital.

When they let us visit her,
She let me sit on her lap,
And I was very gentle.
I pretended that I was her bones.
And I was good enough.

I Wrote Down 3 Things to Do Today

1. Tell Mom we ran out of cookies

Since I turned 7, I've grown enough
To reach the top cabinet if I stand on
A chair from the table that I make Laura hold still.
So far Mom hasn't noticed I write cookies on the grocery list every week.

2. Get the mail

I think some houses train their dogs to bring in the mail.
I've tried to train my sister Leslie, but I don't think she knows
It's supposed to be a daily thing.
I go out of my way to get the mail,
And I reward myself by eating an apple
And leaving the core in the living room.

3. Practice piano

I only added this because I promised Mom
(It was even a pinky promise).
I'm not sure why they don't just write the letters on the keys.
I guess that would give away all the secrets.

Well I have no secrets:
I did scales on my left hand and then scales on my right hand
And then time was up, and I went to go
Finish the chalk drawing of my family before it rained.

Sandra

There was a girl on the bus
Whose stop was right after mine
Who had the most beautiful purple eyeshadow.
She'd scan the rows for a seat
And I would always make sure I sat as close to the window as possible,
My backpack stuffed at my feet,
So she would see the great open spot I had left for her.

She always chose her own seat, but
One day she sat in the seat behind me.
I stood up, turned around,
Even though there was a very high risk the bus driver would yell at me,
And stared at her big, purple eyes
Until she turned her purple attention toward me
Wrinkling her eyebrows
And demanded to know what I was looking at.
Your purple eyes, I said, Will you be my friend?
No.
Why not?
I'm in second grade. I can do what I want. It's a free country, you know.
Oh.
I turned around and looked out the window, hoping to see
Purple eyes in the reflection.

Passing Graffiti on the Highway

When you step out of the life
You thought you used to have

And feel the hunger
The barbaric lust

To take the cells into your hands
And decide

Whether.

Anna Maria Island

We went on vacation to an island.
It was so small that it only took
An hour to ride the trolley round trip, and
For some reason that we happily couldn't figure out,
Our parents let us go out and explore alone, without
"Call us every twenty minutes and describe every
Single person around you who could possibly
Think you are more interesting than salted cabbage soup."

We rode the trolley from the North to the
South, and by the time we got to the pier,
We had already figured it out.
I was Anna, Laura was Maria, and
(Being the youngest, shortest-legged sister
Who was just thankful to be invited on the cross-continent trip)
Leslie was Island.

When we returned, sunburned and chocolate-faced,
We insisted our parents call us by our new names,
And to demonstrate, we shouted "Island! Island!"

And Leslie came marching toward us expectantly
And all the other hotel vacationers quietly rounded up
Their kids and told them in hushed tones not to
Share the pool toys with us anymore. We changed clothes
Even in the unbearable sunburn pain to go to dinner, where
We sat in name order, ordered the same breaded fish with fries
And politely said "thank you" to the waitress when she filled
Up our water glasses with not too many ice cubes.

We went to sleep on the side of our bodies that was least burnt.

After We Bought Licorice with Our Allowance

She said
What are *you* doing here

Lady, we are just kids.
I learned to do long division
Last week and my sister here colored between
All the lines in her children's menu at dinner last night.
And you smell like the library book I got yesterday that
Had a page missing and only five pictures.
And all we want to do is sing new songs about Barney
Even though we haven't thought of a word that rhymes yet.

And then we go stomping through the wooden-floored maze of tables
Waving our hard-won possessions
Like the captains of a conquered sea.

How to be a Mom

The day before yesterday
It was a Tuesday
We were trying on Mom's dresses in front of the mirror.

We knew
We were going to be moms
And Nate was going to be a dad.

Nate told us
He didn't want to be a dad—

He wanted to be a mom because they are prettier
And get to wear the prettier clothes.

I told Nate he was going to have to get rid of that extra piece
If he wanted to be a Mom.

We know that Moms are the ones who
Have the longer hair,
Wear the makeup on their faces,
And grow the babies in their stomachs.

But we didn't know what else.

So we followed Mom around the house
Stepping in her footsteps
Touching the stair handle where she touched it
And telling Daddy that the lawn needs to be mowed.

We are going to be moms.
Even Nate.

Chelsea

I saw her when I was riding my bike the time after
Dad pinched my skin when he fastened my helmet.
She was talking on the phone and walking
At the exact right speed.
She was talking to someone who probably
Didn't know she was
Perfect. But I knew.

She turned and looked down at me for a second
And kept walking down the street.
I put down my bike and walked behind her,
Zigzagging back and forth,
Hoping that some of her perfume would stick to me.

My Idea

I had this great, wonderful, perfect idea
And it was growing and growing inside of me
Until I was going to burst.

Mom

I said

Mom.

She wasn't listening because

She was telling the phone that she was taking the day off work.

If you need immediate assistance, please press 0 and pound,

And you will be transferred to someone who can help you.

Mom

I said.

She still wasn't listening because Leslie was hungry

And she had to make dinner

And who is that at the front door.

I pressed buttons on the phone,

But there was no one to help me.

I never got to tell her my idea before I lost it.

I was very mad.

Ideas are almost as precious as I am.

Lavender

I found a bunny on the side of the road today.
It was so small that it fit in my pocket.
I didn't show anyone because they might tell me to put it back or worse—
Keep it and name it Petunia.

I asked Mom for a carrot
And did a pretend curtsy
After Mom was happy at me
For being so healthy.
I put Lavender next to the carrot
And went outside to swim and catch frogs.

46 minutes later, Lavender did not eat the carrot.
Maybe she didn't want the carrot
And she wanted to swim too.
That's when I knew Lavender was the best bunny ever.

I took her in the pool,
And she floated even without water wings
We practiced our swimming
Until Mom called us for dinner.

I should have known it was a trick.
Mom took Lavender, washed my hands,
And put Lavender in a time-out in the bushes outside.

I went looking for Lavender even before dessert,
But I only found flies.
I wrote Lavender in my address book
Under B for bunny.

The First Day

Mom reminded me (but I already knew)
That tomorrow I am going to that big place
Called Lakeside Elementary School,
A scary brown building that we only pass by when we go to Salty Roll,
My third favorite restaurant.
She said they would have cubbies to put my Barbie lunchbox in
And toys that I point to in the store but Mom never buys.
I decided to bring my pillow and live there.

But when I got there Mrs. Brown wouldn't let me be a T-rex,
Even if I did say please and thank you between roars.
We had to walk in lines that seemed like lollipop
Sticks when all the fun had been licked away.

The other kids could add all the numbers together
But I still had to do $2+5$ on my fingers.
Their drawings looked like themselves—
Mine looked like a scary clown with raspberry eyes.
They knew all the words to *Charlotte's Web*,
And I sat on the edge of the carpet looking at my crossed legs
Wondering what was wrong with my fingers and my brain.

Mom asked me how my first day was.
I told her I didn't belong in first grade
(I didn't belong anywhere)
And I would even go to Andelli's, my tenth favorite restaurant,
If she would please tell Mrs. Brown
I wasn't alive anymore.

The First Dinner with One Less Plate

Mom had to stay overnight in the hospital.
I was worried that the doctors would steal her forever.

I called Mom's phone
And listened for her voice on the answering machine.

I pressed all the buttons,
But there was no one there.

The Enemy

I am swinging when the sprinklers begin,
Their tiny heads sticking up from the ground.
They are too fast for me to outrun.

I step on the grass
And notice a bright bumblebee sticking its stinger into me.
It is so beautiful that I am not sure if it is my body,
Not sure until I see Mom's worried look
As she comes out of the house with a jar of marmalade.

I fear the way Mom raises her eyebrows at
My swelling bump—
I fear the way she looks at me,
Those eyes that see my new disfigured body.

That Monday When the Sun Was Shining but We Didn't Know

I don't know where she went.
I saw her body in a box,
But she wasn't there.
She didn't smile at me,
Not even the smile that said
I love you but I can't show you.

She must have flown off.
She must have gone to Brazil.
She always wanted to go to Brazil.

I think about you

DRIP

More than I

Voluntarily

DRIP

Would.

Axis

It came when the afternoon was brightest.
No one's head turned.

I huddled on every axis but there was no
Solace.

Creeping sauntering systematically
Array by array

Death found her.

Trying to Fill My Brain with Other Things

I went to buy salami at the grocery store.
The deli man smiled at my silent
You-are-stuck-selling-lunch-meat
Condolences and I began thinking,
Wondering what if I,
What if she was still—

No.

I didn't want
That feeling to come,
That taste that everyone wants to say they want
But don't really want.
I don't want it but I need it,
I need it to keep running with the others,
Faster and more foul.

He asked me what I wanted,
And I told him I hate everything equally.

He leaned over the counter and handed me a flower with no stem.
I didn't know it was real until it was dead.

The Procession

I can feel them sitting on me. The dead
Weight of dead souls. I can hear their
Final words
Remember me
But they didn't actually do anything
Memorable. I became the person
I despise because it was too
Easy. Because I
Finally tasted
Self-entitlement
And it was
More delicious
Than knowing
How to fly.

*

*(that feeling of tasting
everything but eating
nothing)*

*

Who are they,
Out there,
Who smile like
They are the tops
Of sandcastles.

It's the same time as it was
10 minutes ago.

He got what he wanted.
Did I convince myself that I wanted it? Did he?

When I lost my
Virginity I lost
My watch too.

Epilogue: Finding the Grown-up Secrets

I haven't found them yet.
I've been looking for them everywhere—
Behind the couch, under the sink,
In the drawer that I wasn't allowed to open because it has matches.

I asked Rob (my bedside table), but he hadn't seen them.
And I asked Clara (the sink in the upstairs bathroom),
But she only reminded me to brush my teeth.
Ida (the hook for my coat) said they weren't in any of my coat pockets.
Then I tried to read some of Daddy's papers,
But I could only sound out 14 of the words.

I asked Daddy to tell me the grown-up secrets,
But he only said "you'll find out someday"
In a way that used words but didn't tell anybody anything.

I thought maybe if I stopped looking for them they would find me.
So I sat down on the top step of the porch,
And listened really, really hard.
I opened my eyes as wide as they would go.
I put my hands around my ears to bring in more sounds.

*Every day
More teeth grew out
My hairs got longer
My legs grew taller—
And every day
More of the secrets spilled out
And I hated them.*

Weather Vane

Why should I want to look out there,
Where too many people hold hands and smile as
Though they couldn't be happier. They can.