

Honey and Ginger

by
Gertrude Morris



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Ten Penny Players, Inc.
Staten Island, NY

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Gertrude Morris studied painting in New York City with Raphael Soyer at the Art Students' League, and drawing with Hans Hofmann at the Hans Hofmann School. She is a Life Member of the Art Students League.

She worked as a model, taught Art in a school for children with learning disabilities, and worked as a Fashion Artist.

Morris has given featured readings in Theater for the New City, CBGB, the Alice Austen House Museum, and numerous other venues.

She has taught Poetry Workshops under grants from Poets & Writers, Inc.

Her poems have been published in *Waterways: Poetry in the Mainstream* (about 80 in all), *Rattapallax*, *Mudfish* 13, 14, 15, *Film Library Quarterly*, *Tokens* (a subway anthology), *Anthology of Erotic Haiku*, other journals and Haiku publications. She was awarded "Haiku Poet of the Month" by *Timepieces*.

She can be seen online reading her poetry at www.tenpennyplayers.org/Videos/Poetry.html.

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What Was Taken

The first time I went back to Longfellow Avenue,
I could see up to my old room:

shrouds of plaster
hung from the ceiling, windows
were covered with tin, gaping
where junkies broke in,

and the toilets dumped in the court.

The street was in ruins where I once played
to the whine of the Scissor
Grinder's wheel, the Old Clothes Man's
cries, the peddlers of hot *beblach*
and sweet potatoes,

the violinist playing off-key
and the pennies we gave him.

When Father died, he was carried
out in a black plastic packet, hefted
light as a wafer by two red-faced
mortician's men;

the neighbors lined up to see him go. Later
I sensed him in the room:

a last look around to reassure us,
sadness at leaving, and he was gone.
And gone were the toilets in the court
like soiled amphoras,

and the junkies twitching like dogs
dream-running. All that was left
was a pile of broken glass and bricks,
a dirty Teddy Bear, a shoe.

What if he came back, would he wander
with all the other ghosts

the long street of chant and ritual,
and echoes of the chopping bowl?

That day I saw the ruins
of my first true home,
the streets of childhood, shining,
forever lost.

Old Things

Without realizing
you get used to things
always where you left them,
the stillness of things.

When I gave the bureau away
I left a note in the drawer:
take this home and care for it,
for I can no longer.

I was accustomed to the warm
feel of the wood,
the veined marble
soft with age.

I remember the old Singer
Sewing Machine
fashioned of oak, wrought iron,
and mother-of-pearl,

abandoned in the street, waiting
to be taken away;
ghost of the tailor
moving the cloth along

under the needle's tooth,
riding the treadle
into a time that lost him.

After it was gone

I looked for it
in the empty space
where it once waited, patient
as a grandmother.

Other Rooms

My Brother learned to play on a *violino piccolo*,
later, on a counterfeit *Amati*

Brahms whispered through the rooms that summer.
Now, when I hear a violin, I hear his voice

in the tender mathematics of Corelli,
of Bach, and Tartini, a voice of reason

that heals, and opens the wound again.
I remember when he waited in coma-dream,

until a red eye winked and his heart
ran off the screen like a dancer exiting.

Too late, we were learning to love each other,
as the lion learned to love the lamb.

Now, he would go to the fire;
he would become his photographs,

forever younger than little sister.

Reflections

A mirror is all that's left
of Mother's *faux*-ivory boudoir set.
Gone, the powder jar with goose down puff,
the hair receiver, the nail buffer,
who knows where?

As a child I sat at Aunt Eva's "vanity,"
cluttered with unguents and female scents.
I swiveled its long mirrors to see
a small clown multiplied by three,
my face floured with Coty's powder,
the loony grin I painted on.
I polished my lunules to pearls
with a nail buffer of pale chamois.

Once mirrors were feared, used in witchery:
a doppelgänger in the glass — break one
and see! — I have no fear of spells.
My fear of mirrors is the truths they tell.
But still I save my fallen hair
as women once did for a "rat," as witches
still do for good or ill.

When faces in a mirror, like doves,
are made to disappear, an empty glass
remains: a blank stare in a dark drawer
with other useful things, waiting to see
the light. This mirror is fitting,
curved well to fit the hand.

Once I saw a girl there, now
a woman eld and strange stares back.
She wears the mask that age put on
like Mother's last face,
the child still there, within.

Dust to Dust

Mother was always cleaning and dusting,
as if to rout her own devils
as well as the dust devils under the bed.

(When she went to her reward, was she
entered in The Ledger of Women
Blessed, Faithful in Cleanliness?)

Her spirit lingered giving orders:
Dust! Clean! Scrub the floor!
For a while I did what I was told

until it lost the power. I let
the dust gather on the furniture,
in the air, cobwebs in the corner,

enough to grow potatoes, parsnips,
I didn't care. But dust, her surrogate,
still reproached me; it proliferated

like wire hangers, (another household
scourge). Dust, at least, was subtle;
dust was quiet, eternally.

Nights when half asleep, I hear
the hangers rubbing against each other.
In the morning there would be more of them.

I hear the dust whisper
soft as a mother, a friend.

Secrets

On Sundays we took the Third Avenue El to Grandma's house on Brook Avenue, in The Bronx. I would spy on people, their secret lives flashing by.

In Grandma's kitchen tea was served in a glass, Russian style, poured from a brass samovar. A bowl of sugar cubes stood in the center of the square oak table, to suck the tea through. There was usually a platter of *bulka* rich with walnuts, raisins and cinnamon.

I sat in the corner pretending to read *The Bobbsey Twins*, eavesdropping on old family secrets: Uncle Velvel who drank and frequented "certain houses" for "certain women," Aunt Tsivia, unmarried and pregnant. (When Grandma arrived from the Old Home with the rest of the children, in no time she had her under the *Chupa* with Itsik her lover.) There were more secrets to come, but then they'd remember the little mouse in the corner and revert to Russian.

The rest of the flat was arctic-cold except my Grandparent's room warmed by the sun through a grimy window facing a gray backyard and clotheslines sagging with someone's laundry: a flowered nightgown, a man's long drawers.

Back there was the true heart of the house
warm with secrets I could only sense.
I would roll and bounce on the bed
piled high with feather quilts and pillows.

Snooping in Uncle David's bureau
I found a packet of letters from ladies
written on pastel pink paper, scented
with rose cologne and S.W.A.K.
on the envelopes.

The time he caught me red-handed,
in my haste to put them back,
the wide red elastic snapped,
smartly rapped by knuckles and shot
across the room — a righteous missile,
I thought — God's punishment.
I promised "never again,"
but I knew that I would.

The next time we visited, drawn
like a magnet to sin, I sneaked back
and opened the forbidden drawer.
Only a faint scent of cologne remained,
the letters were gone.

Old Stories

Oh, it was a long story they told:
the immigrant passage from The Pale
in a small town in Czarist Russia;
how they strove through cloth and dust

to one another, until Sunday in a brown
park Father saw Mother's dove-soft
crimson cheek and wanted more,
until the story ended.

Mother and Brother mourned like widows.
Standing apart, I was a lesser widow
without warrant and without tears.
Years later, when fog wove in

from the sea, full of wine and regret,
I wept for him because he was nowhere
in the mist, and everywhere,
a gray stranger turning a corner.

Mother was old, old, in her last bed
when time went on without her.
The last time I saw her lighting the dark,
she was a white almond, a long pearl.

I imagined their young faces
leaning over a high balcony,
cheeks wet with drops of music,
listening with such faith in the future.

I see them now, dreamless, rapt
listening to earth's night song.

Marigolds' Coin

In winter, when I was a child,
Mother often escaped to Florida,
for her health they said.

(My Brother and I were left
in the care of one reluctant Aunty
not ready to be a Mother.)

I thought she didn't love us,
till gold spilled out of her letters:
nuggets of sun – marigolds' coin.

I still keep them, transparent,
brown as dead moths, pressed between
the pages of Grimm's Fairy Tales.

When very old, Mother died.
She was folded into the earth
like a letter written to rain.

The gold aged to another specie:
a wealth of myrtle – green, immortal,
spilled out of the envelope.

Guggle Muggle

I am lying on feather pillows in Mother's bed,
attended by "walk-ons" shadowy now,
a quarantine notice on the door.

Mother wears her tragedy mask;
Brother is jealous of me, The Star.
Father wishes me back to my own bed

that he might resume the lifelong
doomed courtship of his bride.

Dr. Goodside looks grave and doctorly.

Strengthened by *guggle muggle*,
I am soon well enough to sit
on the fire escape in the warm sun
bundled to the chin, like an old
woman in a sanitarium. To the east
the river, rushing to the bay,

shines like crushed tinfoil in the sun.

Below my cast-iron aerie
Tony the Iceman's grandfather

is weeding his squatter's garden.

Goats from West Farms Road have broken
in again. One bearded lady rears up
on delicate legs to nibble the succulent
red buds of flowering peas.

Heavy udders rampant, the kids

jostle to get at those fast-food
spigots. As many times as he chases them
they always come back.

I see my friends in the street below.

We call to one another,
but the wind carries our voices away.

Tomorrow, if all goes well,
I'll be a child again.

Chewing Tar

That day, I looked up at the flawless sky and said to myself: I will remember this day as long as I live.

Standing in the shadow of the El
I could hear the streetcars screech and spark
as they were switched into the barn.

Even the tenements smelled of spring.
Whiffs of new green drifted
from The Botanical Gardens

and Crotona Park, from the old farms
on West Farms Road, and the purple
and white lilacs in the yards

of the gray clapboard houses
on East 175th Street. We played
in the jungles of empty lots

where flocks of goats grazed and stared
at us with scary yellow eyes.
What junk we ate and lived!

When tar bubbled nastily in vats
for repairing the streets, Solly told us
it was good for the teeth

and we all chewed tar. We stole ice
from the back of Tony's truck
to suck on and called it "water candy."

We bought penny candies livid pink
and green. We ate candy pipes of pan,
note by note, down to a sigh.

After the long day of play
we could hear mother-cries along
the street calling us home.

Bathed, fed and sent to bed
in summer's late light, we fell
into childhood's perfect sleep

on sheets fresh from backyard lines.

Two for a Penny

We took our pennies to Mr. Bloom's
candy store. In the semi-gloom
a lucky cat called *Ketzel* lapped up cream.
So much to choose: chocolate babies,

jujubes, sourballs, candy cups
and licorice twists. Sometimes we pooled
our wealth and shared a charlotte russe
topped with real whipped cream

and a maraschino cherry false and red
as ricrac. Sometimes we split
a large chocolate malted — three tall cups —
While motherly packets of warm bread

smeared with sweet butter, rained down,
we played an ancient game called astragals,
(jacks) chanting runes of death disguised
and divinations of hangings and of kings

who lost their heads. Little cannibals,
we sucked on sugar babies and bull's eyes.
We blew edible pipes of pan, slowly nibbling
away each poison-pink waxen whistle.

Broken cookies were a bargain
and single cigarettes, a quarter —
but that came later.

In Lakewood

I remember the day the picture was taken,
the pristine air, the cold, the sun.
I can smell the pines of a Lakewood winter.

How I preened, Gertrude age eight,
in the gray plush coat and bonnet
Daddy made for me. I carry a brown,

fringed and beaded deerskin reticule
containing a little birch bark canoe
made by a local tribe for The Trade.

I recall the gypsy photographer,
the large square box camera,
the black cloth tent where he did

the work; all I could see
were the legs of the tripod, his legs,
and a disembodied right hand holding

a bulb that he would squeeze
at the penultimate moment. I heard
the click of photographic plates

and my smile was frozen upside down
fixed in acid to last.

Now, here was the image of a child,
with Daddy's gray eyes and smile.



Watch the Birdie!

I sat for a portrait by Brunel
in a white dress embroidered by Mother.
There was an opening in the wicker bench
to hold a palm or rubber plant.

Brunel said the hole was made
when a big dog jumped through it.
Then he vanished under a black cloth,
leaving me open-mouthed, staring

at the vision of a collie sailing through
the air, feathery tail extended,
plunging through the bench without a sound,
the hole instant-bound in wicker braiding.

Having recorded me glassy-eyed,
in my pink-beribboned cambric dress,
he later left the Bronx for Hollywood
where his “glam pics” appeared

in Vogue and Vanity Fair. At the time
I never questioned how the dog
got there, or where it went.
When I look at that photo now,

I see a fey innocent in soft focus,
angel infant, a trusting child.
And when he said: “Watch the birdie!”
I thought a small yellow thing

would fly out of the black cloth,
perch on the camera
and sing!

Taken in Black and White

Here's a photo of little Gertrude,
age ten, with Mother, Brother and Daddy
on a Sunday in Crotona Park, The Bronx.

That day we strolled to Indian Lake,
rented a rowboat, and Daddy rowed us
to the other side. There was a huge

boulder with steps chiseled into it
that we kids would climb on a dare.
(Another day in the park, my pals

and I saw a shabby sunburned man
lying on the lawn. He smiled
at us — did we know him? But then

he opened his fly and a big
white worm fell out.
He kept smiling, and we ran;

faithful to tribal rules
we never told a soul.) Going home
that Sunday we passed folks sitting

on benches along Southern Boulevard.
Shloime, the fiddler, played old country
tunes, with soulful glissandos,

and passed a hat for coins. He disappeared
in the dead of winter — to Florida, they said —
returning in spring with the birds,

to play in the backyards for pennies.
Now the fiddler, the Mothers and the Fathers
are gone. Even the benches are gone.

But I remember a fiddler playing
slightly out of tune, a time
when sprightly ladies danced with ladies,

and bearded men with men, to the old folksong
of a risible rabbi who capered into the water
dry and came out wet again.

The Tailor

In those days, we bought hand-loomed tweeds in Hester Street
that seemed to bloom in the rain.

On his Sundays off Father sewed coats and suits for us,
the buttonholes finished by hand.

He built a jacket in slow careful stages as his father, a Master Tailor in Russia, taught him.

Numberless stitches were sewn into lapels and when they were turned, they lay perfect, light as wings.

Later, he'd fall asleep in the green easy chair till supper time. On Monday, he'd begin another week in the "shop."

He couldn't seem to stop working.
Was he afraid to stop
because his strength was going?

Month by month he grew frailer until he looked like all the others so afflicted: transparent, yellow as air.

In the end he was the smallest package, wrapped in a muslin shroud by strangers. There are times I feel a weight in me

of all the bolts of cloth, the years of seams, Father, stitched straight to where you are.

Where Are They

who circled my childhood
with their honey and ginger,
 their cinnamon fingers,

great stout aunties
with window-box bosoms: Aunt Sarah,
 whose loving hugs

between killer arm
and breast mountain,
 put my skinny neck

out of joint? Where is
Aunt Fanny's gold-tooth
 smile, her *chremslach*

deep-fried and heavy
with honey and *mazel*?
 One by one they left

wearing plain muslin bonnet
and gown: stick-skinny aunties,
 no one I knew.

And the ginger's bite
on the tongue, and the honey?
 under the stone

that holds them down
and speaks for them:
 Beloved Mother

Sister Aunt . . .

Aunt Eva & Uncle Harry

When she died, she was laid out, looking
more like Queen Victoria than herself:
 silver hair done a stranger's way,

cheeks plumped up and rouged. Still
her lover kissed that rosy girl goodnight;
 she was his sweetheart in any disguise,

first love and last. When he died,
Death hung a yellow mask on his face;
 he grew smaller before our eyes.

The day of the funeral grave diggers were on strike.
The coffin was tagged for a later time;
 we walked away and left him half-way home.

It was a dark day in February. Sleet fell
on frozen clay. Earthskin tightened over root,
 and seed, and the dead, so many.

Soon spring would come, bringing lilac
and blossom and warm rain
 to sweeten the earth for them.

Growing

Always mothering,
even the gardens she grew
in perfect row on row,

the leaves polished and shining,
the grapes bishop's purple
on the vine,

fallen apples going to wine;
even the flowers she grew
in their given colors,

their scents discrete;
while I, a gypsy traveler
on the road, go wild

as dandelions, a child's flower
wild as wayward weeds
that grow by their own volition;

a gardener who attends
the soil's parting,
small greens unfolding a flower,

prickly as thistle, dulcet
as honeysuckle, shameless
in their disarray;

open to the birds' business,
and the rowdy ruckus
of the bee.

Sonnet to Sweetbread

My Mother's sweet yeast dough was set in
a brown bowl to rise at the back of the stove,
covered lightly by a cloth of linen.
She punched its soft body down; it strove
to rise again light as resurrection.
If only simple strophes could be as wise
as that risen round; in floury diction
read brown loaves' delectable surprise.
Memory still holds the aromatic smell
of cinnamon and sugar bread. I recall
tiptoeing past the oven lest it fall
light as air to leaden as a bell.
While poems are souls' food and truly said,
this old soul hungers for Mother's bread.

Moths

Here's a month ending, warm November
and moths no longer
beat against the screen
wanting to come in.

I remember Mother's last kiss
soft as a moth's wing on my cheek,
a feather drifting
to a mystery.

Where is she now, Moth-Mother,
knocking at the door of the dark
to tell her green tale,
a gardener again?

Where are the others? Was I raised
to be alone, to bear the weight
of all our dead,
to walk the path

with them, as I did with her
in our last garden together?
Now they are beating on the screen
of memory

to come in. The unseen
are all about, and in me.
They are what I became.

Flowers

Mother's writing was barely legible,
but she sent a flower in her letters—
sweet peas usually — her love code.

Once she wrote to a niece and nephew.
They were appalled by that crippled script.
It troubled them to be reminded

that their people remained illiterate,
and they, a mere generation away
from the immigrant ship Astoria.

If it took love to know when love
was given they'd never decipher the code.
He filled the lacuna with a sermon:

"See children? This is what happens
when you don't go to school."
The other guests could see my pain.

Our hostess enjoyed the bloody show.
Chain-smoking Camels unfiltered,
in time the smoke took her.

He mourned her death in his way.
Then he took a series of faded beauties,
old stars with hair incarnadined.

They gave him all that he required:
a cook, a hostess, and a taste
of elderly pneumatic bliss.

They're gone now, and all their troubles
Lord. Some were blessed and slept away;
Mother, knowing, went to the dark.

She was a beauty without artifice,
wise in the ways of gardens and flowers.
They threw her flowers away.

Mother Flora

Instead of Ida
they might have named her Flora
after the goddess who uttered flowers
and breathed the earth alive.

And I, her daughter
named Flora after her instead of
hard Gertrude after soft Gisha
my Grandmother.

If poems are flowers
poets utter of the beloved
dead, their memory lives on
in the metaphors they quicken,

as violets,
lily of the valley,
the marigold and purple pansy
were the metaphors she spoke

for my heart's ease —
the sweet peas in her letters —
And I, child of a gardener,
still learn how poems

can order the chaos
of love and loss, having heard
the language of that territory
from my beginnings,

to the last breath
of the one who taught me.

Grandmother

When I think of those days,
it's the light I remember:
 sun spangling the path
through the cool of the little woods
where Grandmother read her prayers.

She prayed for all of us,
especially for me, the wild one,
 always running to the lake
to swim with the local boys.

After all,
we were blue bloods, *Kohanim*.

While at prayer,
a hummingbird hummed at her ear.
 It hung suspended in the air,
and sipped at the orange cup
of a trumpet blossom.

Then it rested on the edge of The Book
for an iridescent moment,
 illuminating the Holy Writ,
and flew up into the light.

It was a Messenger;
her eyes filled when she spoke of it.

The night they found her on the floor,
her head lolled without will.

Her cotton underwear and stockings
were freshly laundered
 and hung on the shower rod to dry;
her fine hair was braided for bed.

It seemed a pity, even at ninety,
her body was white, smooth as a girl's,
with more to give.

Grandma and Grandpa

Even in the photo,
her eyes glittered blue power;
She and Grandpa in Saint Mary's Park,
spiffy in new coats – his new fedora,
her silk cloche in the style
of the late Queen Mary –

They smiled and smiled, a little bride
and groom on a wedding cake.

When she died, she was laid out
at home, in a plain pine box placed
on two chairs, with candles
burning at each end.

Alive, her eyes could inhale you.
Now one eye was half-open, faded
as blue ink on yellowed paper.

The rabbi was a stranger, too young,
too pink and plump, rocking over
a small Grandma, growing smaller.

“She of the dead is now wiser
than us all,” he intoned.
How did he know?

She was a long life’s letter,
bundled away with the others,
I would have kept if I could.



Days of Awe

“The trees have tongues;
the leaves speak; there are
sermons in these stones. . .”

— from a New Year sermon

Other years I felt you there, so real
I expected you to walk toward me, smiling.
This year there is nothing.

The grave is poor barren as a sandlot.
What could have happened to the ivy?
Who murdered the ordinary weeds?

The leaves are silent;
the stone tells the little we need to know.

That last year, when the others stayed away,
we walked in the garden of the Home,
I watched you grow smaller, alone.

Here you are in the photograph:
sun on your soft hair,
bent shoulders I could almost touch.

Beneath the still tree,
the grave keeps only the least of you.
the best of you is gone,
but where?

Wild Sorrel

On a low hill above their grave
I found a patch of wild sorrel.
Mother would pick it for *schaw*,
a cold summer soup garnished with onion,
hard boiled egg and sour cream.

I picked some to take home,
the rest I planted on the grave,
prising the stony root-locked clay
as best I could. All Winter I hoped
the snow would keep the sorrel warm,

fingers of roots reaching down
to them, as if they knew.

Dry Clay

All year I think they wait for me.
Do they know that mourning doves
rose in a whisper of silk at my coming?

Do they know I tamp down prayers
to a nest of stained shrouds and bones
where nothing else will grow?

Or having quit the arid sack of earth
we gave them, they are long gone
like birds to other latitudes.

Leavings

Gentleman Jimmy Walker might have worn
the suede gloves stitched in black,
the immaculate pair of spats,
piled in a heap on Grand Street
with other relics of the 30's.

Father wore gloves and spats like these
for a snapshot taken on a winter day
in '38, on Lafayette Avenue, the Bronx.
Natty in gray fedora and plush coat
from Crawford Clothes for Men,

he smiled into the camera eye
as if life were indeed wonderful.
Here are steel arches, custom-made
like his, for standing in a "shop"
for 40 years. Here are a woman's shoes

like Mother's that still held the shape
of her feet. Whose things are these, piled
at the curb on Grand Street? A scattered corpus
of interrupted lives, a legacy of leavings
no one claimed but a few street-wise

scavengers snarling over a celluloid
mirror, an agate pot, the photo of
a bare baby on a white bearskin rug;
and the tchochkas, all the cosy clutter
they saved from trips and weddings,

as if those talismans could keep them
from the dark. But death found them, anyway,
and all their dear stuff was shoveled
out on Grand Street, waiting for a pickup
to the far east of the Bronx,

where gulls wheeled and cried their rusty
harsh complaint in the ruined,
acrid air of the fires, never done
with burning the trash of generations,
the incense of decay.

Raising the Dead

In an old Columbo Show, the housekeeper
is seen watching TV unaware of the killer
creeping up the stairs.

Soon, good old bumbling Columbo
will arrive in his shabby raincoat,
his maundering glass eye,

his leaving and returning
to ask the suspect one last question.
Suddenly my brother, the actor,

appears on the small screen,
a blurred image of himself,
miming a script too far to hear.

But then the inner screen goes dark
and he disappears, again.
Somewhere out there, a dead star

wanders among the stars, and I can
only wait for a second coming,
his resurrection in Video.

Daddy's Mandolin

We had chamber music in our home; even
Lily the canary trilled, love-driven,
in a duet with the basso vacuum.
I tortured the ancient upright piano, given
Clementi's Sonatinas to reiterate ad nauseam.
Mother sang soprano mewling-thin.
Tartini's Devil possessed by Brother's violin.
Of course The Star was Daddy's mandolin.
I loved that lute played in minor key,
its pear shaped belly set with mother of pearl,
the frets and pegs inlaid with ivory.
I was moved by some old song's folderol.
But age turned it sour as old age will.
Now Daddy and his mandolin are still.

Queen Gertrude

I was named Gertrude after my Grandmother Gitel – Gisha in Gomel – How Gitel or Gisha, became Gertrude is a mystery.

If it were a matter of the G why not Greta or Griselda? But no, it was Gertrude: the old maid in the play, the weird aunty in the attic.

Of course, there was Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. She was a mother. But my Mother never read Hamlet, although I said she did.

To my surprise there were six saints named Gertrude; one of Nivelles, abbess and virgin, born March 17, 620.

That I was born March 16th seemed a good augury when I needed her help. But when I entered a church to light a candle to Saint Gertrude,

at first it wouldn't light – how did it know? Then it flared up and rang like a bell down the centuries, waking a girl, on a narrow cot in a gray cell, surprised and pleased to hear from me.

I imagined her as a young girl. Somehow I thought she knew me, her virgin dust still vivid when I prayed to her.

Although my Mother never read Hamlet, she read *A Child's Garden of Verses* to me. Flowers spoke for her: *star of the earth, forget me not.*

What to Remember

Remember the girl she was,
her hair, a chestnut flame
burning all who touched her—
and there were many.

Remember she danced in a soft rain,
that was barely rain,
more a kiss
a drizzle of kisses on her face.

It was in a clearing
in a city eden. Leaves told
the latest news: it was time
to take the fall.

Remember another time
another place:
each spring she saw a tulip tree
in bloom, like a white bouquet,
from the east window of her room,
and a red freight train rattling by.

It was time that took her
from a child's paradise:
the long days of play,
the quiet streets.

She remembers
going to the zoo on Sunday with Daddy,
wearing the navy blue coat
he made for her,
Star of Daddy's home movie.

Kissing

I don't remember whose tongue
first tangled with mine. I do remember
my tongue pushed his out.

"You're not supposed to do that,"
he sneered. Who knew?
And so my first encounter ended

as a learning experience:
in virginity is the kiss perfected.
Was public kissing *sine qua non*

to the genre? That couple on the platform
of the IRT attached like limpets
to the wall, and to each other,

oblivious to the trains that came and went
from Eighth Avenue to Canarsie.
They couldn't have cared less that kissing

French was not a French conceit
but of Roman origin. It was called
Savium. They took to kissing as

to the hunt, pouncing on random women,
to deliver the coup de grace. Laws
were passed, granting a kissee

the right to marry any such licentious,
larky, lollygagger, if she chose.
Would I have married that boy, prinked

with acne, who sipped the attar of my rose
like an inebriated bee? Ah, no,
for he was soon replaced by another,

and another. Still I missed my fledgling
flower kisser — *besar flor*,
of that halcyon summer.

Old man, would you know me now,
that girl whose lips you hungered for?
Your goodwife has me to thank

for your good kisses. I was the girl
who taught you how —
when kissing was all.

Moonstar

In summer's latitude alien pale,
I yearned to join that vivid tribe
of barefoot gypsies passing through
a season of sun-fired saffron skin

to skin on the beach the rocks
the dunes all night. Bedded
by briar rose and bay I was
that summer's brown girl

star of the old skin game
dealing in cold transactions.
Some nights alone the scent
of honeysuckle shuddering

on a cottage wall breathed sweetness
unbearable. The caught astonished
moon cried "O" in the trees.
I rode my wheels up and down

the sleeping town past a moon-
paved bay shivering with silver
litter where buoys rocked by the sea
tolled the end of summer.

Dry Run

Lying in bed, holding my breath,
arms crossed on my chest,
I imagine a tag on my big toe,
Jane Doe. I take inventory

down the length of me. Goodbye
legs veined like rivers on a map,
fulcrum of my wheel — pudenda —
sparsely fuzzed as a peach.

Goodbye breasts that once swung
like lady apples when I bent
to lover's work; aureoles pale,
nipples silent as buzzers someone

once pressed to let him in.
My eyes cannot see themselves,
but see the other. My head
must be there on its thin stalk,

a reliquary of memories
brittle as the finger bone
of a saint; my voice offering old
sorrows dark and sweet as fudge.

Dear one — myself — fear not.
This was only a game of death
to practise resurrection
miraculous!

Glossary

Astragals: “knuckle bones” or jacks (*Two for a Penny*; p. 13)

Beblach: garbanzo beans (*What Was Taken*, p. 18)

Bulka: sweet bread with various fillings. (*Secrets*, p. 6)

Chremslach: a confection (*Where Are They*, p. 20)

Chupa: wedding canopy. (*Secrets*, p. 6)

Gomel: a town in the Ukraine (*Queen Gertrude*, p. 34)

Guggle muggle: a mixture of raw egg, brandy, sweet cream, whole milk and sugar. (*Guddle Muddle*, p. 10)

Ketzel: cat (*Two for a Penny*, p. 13)

Kohanim in ancient days, high priest of the Temple (*Grandmother*, p. 27)

Mazel: blessings (*Where Are They*, p. 20)

Ricrac: zigzag braid used as trimming for clothes (*Two for a Penny*, p. 13)

Star of the earth: in the rose family: also called “the blessed herb.”
(*Queen Gertrude*, p. 34)

S.W.A.K.: sealed with a kiss. (*Secrets*, p. 6)

Tchochkas: knick-knacks (*Leavings*, p. 31)



Gertrude Morris studied painting in New York City with Raphael Soyer at the Art Students' League, and drawing with Hans Hofmann at the Hans Hofmann School. She is a Life Member of the Art Students League.

She worked as a model, taught Art in a school for children with learning disabilities, and worked as a Fashion Artist.

Morris has given featured readings in Theater for the New City, CBGB, the Alice Austen House Museum, and other venues. She has taught Poetry Workshops under grants from Poets & Writers, Inc.

Additional poems have been published in *Waterways*: *Poetry in the Mainstream* (about 80 in all), *Rattapallax*, *Mudfish 13, 14, 15*, *Film Library Quarterly*, *Tokens* (a subway anthology), *Anthology of Erotic Haiku*, other journals and Haiku publications. She was awarded "Haiku Poet of the Month" by *Timepieces*.

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