



228 Cambridge Street

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THE HOUSE IS SNORING, A KIND of high-pitched whistle. I do not know how to enter anymore. The front door is lost behind overgrown privet. The cellar window is barred by an old-fashioned rose, a Rambler, a sweet-scented thing that once turned the lawn into summer snowdrifts. Now, on this cold January day, it is nothing more than a swath of thorns, blackened rose hips clinging to rigid arms.

I loop rope and a bow saw over my shoulder and climb into the thickened branches of the cedar planted a century ago too close to the house. A raccoon watches me from inside a hole chewed into the second-floor siding. I toss my throw line higher.

The tree's canopy is taller than the house. I clear deadwood. I gauge the distance between here and there. I leap. A flock of pigeons scatter. Six return.

When I was a child this house astounded me, its slumped floors and crooked doorways. I'd hide, cocooned inside burgundy folds of winter drapes, listening to the whispers, cries, and innuendoes of my aunts and mother, my uncles and their wives, and the hordes of cousins who all wanted something from my grandmother either before or after she died.

Some things they said they wanted: a set of gold-rimmed china, a porcelain doll with sawdust feet, the rumored purse of Civil War-era coins, the deeds to the properties.

There is a soft spot in the roof. I secure the rope to the chimney and wrap an end around my waist. I lie prone and saw through spongy shingles. There is a flurry

previously published in
Yemassee Journal, Fall 2015



of pale gray feathers, an upside-down storm that sticks to my hair and inside my nostrils.

The smell. Why does decay comfort me?

I rappel into the hole, spinning with the rope's torque. In the shaft of afternoon light, I see decades of curd-like guano. Particles so dry and light they float past, prisms of blue-gray that settle once again on the shrouded attic furniture—trunks, chairs, gilded mirrors, black walnut picture frames.

I land softly, my sneakers cushioned in guano. It gives me strength. I rock back and forth, heels to toes, side to side. The scent is an aphrodisiac, and I am a dog rolling on my back.

Love me, I say.

And still, this house, once inhabited by my mother, my grandmother, my great-grandmother, doesn't know me. I am the child who clung to the back hem of my mother's dress, unseen.



My grandmother was the last of the familial guardians. The rest of us, pillagers. Who stole the gold coins? Who has the Bible? And what of my grandfather's cavalry sword?

I turn on my flashlight. What remains in the attic is what might be found along a Dust Bowl roadside. An ironstone washbasin. A treadle

sewing machine. A domed steamer trunk. Worth measured against distance, bulk, and weight.

But the doll—why leave Elizabeth behind?

She was a source of contention between my mother and a sister. Who deserved her more, my mother with children or a barren woman who could ensure the doll remained intact?

I press my mouth to Elizabeth's porcelain lips. Her hair, human, is brittle. Her white doeskin torso is scuffed like a baby's first shoes.

I want her. I want to wash her in warm milk, comb butterfat through her hair. If I snip two fingers off my gloves, she'll have wool stockings.

The six pigeons on the roof have multiplied. They swoop in through the hole and hover in the rafters.

I realize too late that the sawdust inside Elizabeth is pouring from the seams in her worn feet. I pinch off her ankles, but her body is almost empty. If not for her porcelain head and shoulder plate, she'd be no more substantial than a sock.

In the sawdust on the floor, larvae squirm.

I fold Elizabeth's legs over her torso and cross her arms against the back of her knees. I place her in the ironstone washbasin and cover her with old newspaper so what is left remains.



The attic stairs lead down to the upstairs bathroom, which, before indoor plumbing, was the north end of the hall. The house has not been lived in for decades. The pipes have burst. Stains discolor the beadboard paneling. Mice droppings litter the buckled floor.

I step into the cast iron tub and stick my head through the hole in the wall. I am prone to vertigo. As I look down into the shaft, my head feels heavy. My heels lift.

If I were a bat, a bird, or a raccoon, I could travel inside these walls, up and down wooden beams, across old wiring, along crumbling flues. I would find the broken pieces. I would shore up the central fireplace, unwarping its chamber, leveling the three crooked floors.

A leg is missing from the clawfoot tub I stand in. I sit and lie back against its lip. I am drifting in a listing boat. I hold on to its sides and close my eyes.

When my mother was sixteen, an older boy

followed her. He did this every day for a week. Eventually, she went for a ride on his motorbike. Two months later, she was pregnant. At his house, his mother, a kind woman who didn't speak English, filled her tub with hot water. She gestured for my mother to undress and sit in it. My mother did not want to, but she was respectful. As the woman poured in more hot water from a teakettle, my mother splashed it over her stomach as directed.

I turn on the faucet. Slivers of dry rust fall out, staining my feet.

My mother did not lose her baby that day. The boy on the motorbike was too old and had the wrong nationality for her family to accept into the family by marriage. Instead, they banished her to Talitha Cumi, a home for unwed mothers. Gospel of Mark: Jesus took the deceased child by the hand. *Talitha Cumi*—"Little girl, I say to you, arise!"

She had a son, but it was 1950, and she was sixteen, so Catholic Charities placed him in foster care until the business of her signature on the adoption papers could be worked out.

The hallways in the house are still adorned with holy pictures. Dark, brooding pieces: The Annunciation, John the Baptist, The Crucifixion. Winged cherubs fill golden chalices with His blood.

No one has removed this artwork, although all the brass doorknobs are gone.



There are six staircases, running and twisting up and down three floors, then descending underground.

The front of the house, with its horsehair-stuffed furniture and Victorian-era drapes, was used for wedding photos and family wakes. The back rooms evolved with time.

The main kitchen, its wide hearth plastered and sealed off, became the back room where we watched television as children, and where my grandmother, much later, perpetually slept in a hospital bed. The summer kitchen became the downstairs bathroom. A modern kitchen was built, connecting the root cellar and woodshed to the main house.

My mother is one of seven children. Three boys. Three girls. One stillborn.

I am in the dining room. The Oriental rug is moth-eaten, a kind of crazing that coils from its center. When I step, cocoons crunch, and a hatch

of moths rise. Mice, maybe rats, skitter inside the walls.

When my grandmother was alive and of sound mind, we ate Sunday dinner together. Roast beef. Potatoes. Gravy. Beans. The closet hid china—five unused sets. The sideboard contained generations of monogrammed wedding silverware. The round oak pedestal table had four expandable leaves. As a child, I crawled between its splayed paws to hide.

My aunt Marie was the oldest of the sisters. She was the most beautiful. There's a picture of the three girls taken at the beach, their arms linked, wearing high-waisted bathing suits. Dark, curly-haired girls. They stand, slightly sideways, their legs demurely placed.

In a few years, Marie would become paralyzed. The doctor who was to deliver her baby was delayed. The baby was crowning. The nurses held her legs together—*wait, wait*. It was not the reason she would never walk, although the family blamed him.

It was polio. They prayed. *Talitha Cumi*—"Little girl, I say to you, arise!" She couldn't, yet she'd go on to birth six more children while paralyzed from the waist down.

Her wheelchair didn't fit under the table for Sunday family dinners, so she ate with a plate on her lap. From my hiding place between the table's paws, I stared at her once youthful legs, now atrophied. She, or someone, had arranged them against the calf strap, crossed demurely at the ankles. Her tiny feet in black leather pumps lay silently on footplates.

The oak table is gone. The sideboard is gone. Yet, I can close my eyes and touch each. They are more familiar to me than my grandmother, my uncles, my cousins, my aunts.



My grandmother kept plants on a marble-topped Victorian table in front of the north-facing window: Boston Fern, Coleus, Wandering Jew. Outside, the land my great-grandfather once farmed, mostly winter crops—spinach, carrots, and radishes, which he hauled by horse-drawn wagon into Faneuil Market—is now asphalt. The uncles, enterprising as boys were expected to be, gained ownership of the back fields from

my grandmother, although she would tell her daughters that they forced her to sign over the deeds. The marble-topped table is now gone. The plants and pots are on the floor, the thick, blackened stems mummified.

Margaret was the youngest girl. She was, by her own admission, of superior intelligence. She married briefly. The marriage was annulled after a doctor verified she was not able to engage in sexual relations. Unfettered by marriage and children, she would attend law school, although her practice primarily involved composing contracts to acquire land from my grandmother. She died owning the house and everything that was left inside, yet her last years were spent in a nursing home, unable to walk, turned daily by strangers whose language she couldn't understand. When asked if she knew where she was, she answered, *Nigeria*.

I have come back because this house and all of my grandmother's, great-grandmother's, and great-great-grandmother's belongings are slated to be sold by the Sisters of Charity, who were gifted the family home after my aunt died. One uncle, the only one in the family who could afford the nuns' asking price, has plans to bulldoze it into dust.

So, I have come to say goodbye. To each room. Each closet. Each floor.



There are two ways to reach the cellar. I've never had the courage to enter it through the pantry, where the steep stairs drop like a plumb line into darkness.

Today, I choose the woodshed. On the far wall, the door to the outside is double-sided and crosshatched to supposedly withstand raids during colonial times. As children, the cousins and I would search its scarred surface, painted thick green, for arrowheads and tomahawk marks. We made up stories, although the scars were most likely dings by logs, and later, wagons, after the kitchen stove was converted to coal.

Excavated from the earth, dirt shelves line the shallow cellar steps. As I descend, the beam from my flashlight captures the pinched faces of blackened fruit sealed inside aqua-tinted jars. The air becomes dense—peat, rock, dust, decay. An animal scurries past. I do not know what. It is cold, and ice crystals vein the earthen walls.



I can only go so far. Fear stops me. I reach up and touch the thick, hand-hewed ceiling boards. The house, all fourteen rooms, settles over me. It is heavy as if I were inside an iron lung. I breathe in and out, in and out, taking in what last air it will give me.

My breath is ragged, and my legs are weak. I drop the flashlight, but I do not need it. I know this house—its floors, stairways, ribbing and annexes, its spine. It is the scaffolding that once encased all I needed.

On the main floor, the doors that opened to the outside in the woodshed, mudroom, kitchen, downstairs bathroom, and front foyer will not open. It is as if they still refuse to acknowledge me.

I climb the back stairs and then the attic stairs. Startled from their roosts, the pigeons blindly crash into each other as they fly up, up, through the opening in the roof and into twilight.

I grab Elizabeth. I reach for the tail of the rope, and we climb. ❀