

Sketches of Home

SKETCHES
OF HOME

SUZANNE CLARK

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Suzanne Clark, *Sketches of Home*

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For my mother,
Mary Lee Hester

Sketches of Home

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Author's Note

I wrote a poem when I was six called “The Secret Stream.” It was my first poem, a childish, artless bit of verse—“I love my little flowing stream/It seems as though it’s just a dream”—but years later, as I was walking along the Virginia Creeper Trail with my family diminishing in the distance and the yellow curling leaves of autumn blowing around my head, I thought of that stream and was given to know its meaning. The stream was a prayer, a hunger of heart that had always flowed inside me—“When I look up in the sky so blue/Everything I wish comes true”—a way for me to shut my eyes, as poet Patrick Kavanagh said, to see my way to heaven.

God had planted in me a secret stream to be the source of poems to help me see. Through my childhood years and on into adulthood I wrote for pleasure and insight. So it was when I married that I began to keep a journal of stabbing moments that would, twenty years later, become *Sketches of Home*. “What earthly sweetness remaineth unmixed with grief?” wrote St. John of Damascus. Sweetness and grief mingle in the song of life.

I write as a way of suspending my longings, of granting immortality to the visions that crack the clay mold of daily existence. Once I was sitting in church and happened

to notice four-year-old Allison Jones smiling at me. For an instant I saw the love of heaven turned fully upon me and quickly turned my head to hide my tears. Wherever I go I see burning bushes, objects on fire: the needle I keep in the hem of my bathroom curtain for taking out a splinter or sewing on a last-minute button. Fragments of pottery and porcelain I dig up every spring when I plant my garden. Ivy that twists through the cinderblocks in my basement. Each of these whispers, "What is my meaning?" When I look closely, I learn my own story, a story shadowed forth by the all-wise God. To write is to cherish, even in the presence of pain.

May you, my reader, cherish the drowsy bee and skipping boy. As a famous architect once said, "God is in the details," even down to the inscription on the horses' harness bells pictured on the great and terrible day of His coming: "Holiness unto the Lord."

————— I —————

THRESHOLD

The Richest Woman

I have been married a week. I call myself Rebekah, after the Old Testament bride chosen for Isaac. I've been thinking of your body—the tent of you enclosing me, the secrecy of skin. On a skin of water we glided at Fall Creek Falls. Between paddle strokes the pauses were silver, and our eyes could not unlock. Why should we want words?

I am Sheba, the richest woman. Here, take my pearls. I will have your spices.

At White's Mill the water sang everywhere, in columns and streams and falls. It was architecture and orchestra. We saw 30,000 trout (said the sign), some speckled, some gold in pools flashing. You bought me flour for bread. We will take this communion all of our lives until Love Most High consumes our separate dust.

Raining

You're sleeping before graveyard, and I'm alone with the rain, long and slow like time. I put my book down, to listen.

This is the last rain of the warm season, according to Ida Belle and Hattie who were out on their porch when I was shaking my dustmop this afternoon. They know all sorts of mysteries: the dangers of dog days, secrets of having a girl child, tricks for rooting flowers. Behind the rain I hear frozen trees scraping against the house and the stomp of your snow-packed boots on the mat.

By winter we will love each other more but I don't see how. In one brief summer I have forgotten what it was like to be single. Why do you sleep so long?

Maybe we can go camping in the mountains soon, before the first frost. In the dark tent we'll cling and make a knot against the vastness.

The deep says we are eternal. I cannot take it in. Only the rain unbroken teaches me just now that we will be lovers forever.

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CORRIDORS

Family Portrait

Here is a photograph of an imaginary family. The mother, with her beautiful silky face, smiles I think sadly, but that impression may be derived from the dream quality of the picture. The father, charming in an Air Force uniform, has a carefree, boyish appearance. The three children are but babies with eyes magical and bright. So little about the father would stay with them: odd things, like hot dog soup and a recording of "The Teddy Bears Picnic." The only other memory, that of being held, is so dim it might be a wish.

There is no recollection of divorce, but some unforeseen calamity struck causing the carousel to overturn so all the children were thrown out. One remembers sitting for hours in blinding sun on a step overlooking railroad tracks waiting for her mother to come back, not understanding the mother was made to sign papers somewhere far away.

Ages later the father met his daughters at an airport to pick up pieces. He hurried toward them, smiling like a boy. They could not take it in that this their father was standing before them and now was embracing them. But where was his sorrow? The voice that should be breaking off in

the middle of explanations? Over dinner he chatted comfortably, asking many questions. The daughter adored him with his crinkly eyes and gentle manner but was unable to come out of the dream. She waited for the revelation but it never came. Just a few simple words—"For the pain I caused you . . . for my absence"—and she could have traveled back in time, orbiting past pieces of dreams, landing safely in a child's room with a father's arms around her and the moon bright as an angel in the window. But it was not to be.

The father departs; he writes now and then; he stops writing and fades as dreams do. The daughter will continue to look at the picture sometimes, but she will not explain its spell. Even if the father should come to life again, she will always see a stranger.

————— 3 —————

STAIRWAY

Reciting Heaven

As you inch in the dark toward my body warmly smelling of milk and skin, I think of my sister and her strange sleep. It is a lonely thought, like water falling in a cave. Were it not for you, my suckling, to fix me to this room in space, I think I would be lost, drifting after Robyn and the voice I hear though she doesn't speak.

I know she is not the statue I touched with my hand (though her blond curls held). She is not resting under a roof of flowers. Your small breath teaches me to believe all things and I do, reciting Robyn's heaven in the cave with you.