

DE ANIMA

Essence*

*(Front Plate by Juan Castilla. Abstract Art by Wendy Faris.)



BURIAL

I have always had difficulty sleeping. My father's story of my infancy is about the trouble he had getting me to sleep; how he would walk for hours, rocking me on his shoulder until I would finally drift off, only to awaken again the instant he set me into my crib. When I was older, I would spend weekends at my maternal grandmother's house. It was perched on stilts on a hilltop at the far corner of a cul-de-sac, at the end of a quiet street, away from the noise and heat of the city where I grew up. The living room jutted out over the hillside, and when I sat there, looking out her picture window, I imagined I was floating, as if on a boat, held in some magic tide that rocked me gently and kept both me and the house from tumbling down the hillside. At night, I would beg my grandmother to stay in the single bed next to mine, telling her I could not sleep alone. She would sing me songs from her childhood, her voice soft and gravelly, like water over stones:

My bed is like a little boat
Nurse tucks me in when I embark;
She girds me in my sailor's coat
And starts me in the dark.

At night, I go on shore and say
Good night to all my friends on shore
I shut my eyes and sail away
And see and hear no more.

And sometimes things to bed I take,
As prudent sailors have to do;
Perhaps a slice of wedding cake,
Perhaps a toy or two.

All night across the dark we steer;
But when the day returns at last
Safe in my room, beside the pier,
I find my vessel fast.

I imagined my bed floating out to a benevolent sea on the same magic currents that held the house aloft. In the morning I was always surprised to wake up--dramatic evidence that I had, in fact, against all my expectations, actually fallen asleep. The surprise would turn sharp and edgy, like rusted metal, at the discovery that my grandmother had betrayed me: sometime in the night she had left the bed next to mine empty and me to spend the night alone.

Years later, I was going through some of my mother's things and came across a 'Child's Garden of Verses,' by R. L. Stevenson. The pages were thick, worn, and filled with Victorian line drawings of cherubic-looking children. Inside the front cover was a drawing of a child in bed, her covers dotted with boats, houses and toy soldiers. A few pages further was my mother's childhood scrawl; she had written her and her brother's names, upside down. The first poem in the volume was the one my grandmother had sung to me. Knowing I would want to sing the same song to my grandchildren, I had cursed my capricious memory over the years for not being able to recall each and every verse. And yet, finding the poem had felt like running into an old lover on the street--as if some private act between two people had just been made public. I wished that the poem could have stayed a secret, a memory handed down from grandmother to granddaughter.

As I grew too old for grandmother's songs and not yet old enough for the comfort of a man, other books of my mother's childhood helped put me to sleep. 'Heidi' was my favorite. Several volumes from the series, filled with brightly painted illustrations printed on heavy paper the color of weak tea, sat by my bedside for years. Inside, inscriptions told me that the books had been awards to my mother for perfect attendance at Sunday school.

I wanted to be Heidi. I wanted to live in a world of green mountains filled with animals, unpredictable weather, cool breezes, and a benevolent grandparent who cared for me with hunks of cheese and bread. Instead, I lived on the West Coast in a world of unrelenting heat and light, and I resented their insistence. I wanted fog, rain and snow--soft grays and greens and browns that would envelop and enclose me. I wanted relief from the glaring whites and silvers of the brightly lit city where I lived.

I don't have those Heidi books anymore. They were destroyed during the last desolate years of my mother's life, stolen or lost in a move or a fire. I don't have my mother or my grandmother anymore, either. I have boxes of photographs of both of them, most showing them young and beautiful before the ravages of age and life took their tolls.



I often find myself stalled on the stairway in my house looking at one photograph that hangs there among several others. It shows a group of people gathered on the porch of a Victorian home. The windows are long, black, shuttered; with white lace curtains hanging behind them. The rear end of a black Model-T butts into the frame on the right; the last pillar of the porch frames the photo on the left. An old woman with white hair in a bun sits in a rocker on the porch surveying the people spread before her. There are three women sitting in chairs on the edge of the porch--there is no railing--with three children nearby in the yard. A boy in his late teens appears to have just arrived. He is the only one standing, the only one looking at the photographer. The image is unposed, casual, as if the photographer were warming up for a photo about to be taken, and this one were premature. But this is the image that has endured. Now, sixty-some odd years later, it is here, on my wall, a few hours' drive from where it was taken after having been moved across the country with my grandmother (one of the young women sitting on the porch), rediscovered by my mother (one of the young children in the yard), and then appropriated by me--only to be moved back across the country, and displayed here, in the same state where it was taken.

I am from these women. I am their great niece, great granddaughter, granddaughter, daughter. I am almost as old as my grandmother was when this photograph was taken. And yet, I feel more like the young man pictured there: not quite sure how I fit into the group, seeing something the others do not, standing while the others sit.



I now live far away from the heat and light of my childhood, close to where my grandmother was born and raised and where the house in this photograph still stands. I was drawn here not by my grandmother, but by my desire to be with two different men. My father drew me the farthest--3,000 miles to the East. Then he left me again, to retrace his steps west. I stayed and was eventually drawn 450 miles north by the man who would become my husband.

For some time after moving here, I was not fully aware that I was living so close to where my grandmother was born. But when she called from her home of the previous fifty years on the West Coast, she regaled me with memories from her childhood and descriptions of the people she grew up with; they were exactly as I now found the people around me.

"Do they still put you on probation?" she asked, giving me the words I could not find to describe my sense of alienation from this new place, the feeling that no one would let me in on the rules to a new game.

She told me stories of her youth in the exquisite detail available only from the aged who have become distant from their present, but close to far-flung memories. She told me about skating on the river behind her house in the winter; about the woman in town who had five sons that drank but considered herself lucky that they were never all drunk at the same time; about the fights between her father's Irish Catholic and mother's Welsh Protestant families; of how she loved to visit her father's farm a few miles away from her mother's home; of how she and each of her sisters was known in town for having a different but special quality or talent; and how proud and vain she had been to be known as the most beautiful.

She was also the most practical and early on in life took to taking care of other people's problems--not the people, just their problems. She went to business school while the rest of her sisters became teachers, and worked not for fulfillment but for money, postponing her marriage until she could pay off the mortgage on her and her mother's family home.

I once visited this home--the one my grandmother grew up in, the one built by her uncles, the one in the photograph--when I was a child. My brother and I were visiting our father on the East Coast. My grandmother's sister--a sweet, spinster schoolteacher--had lived in and cared for their childhood home all her life. She had recently died, and my grandmother was returning to take care of the affairs of death: a task she would perform many times in her long life.

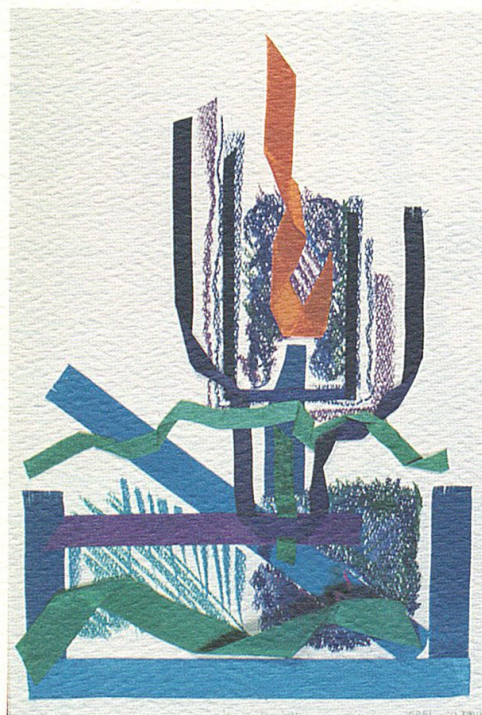
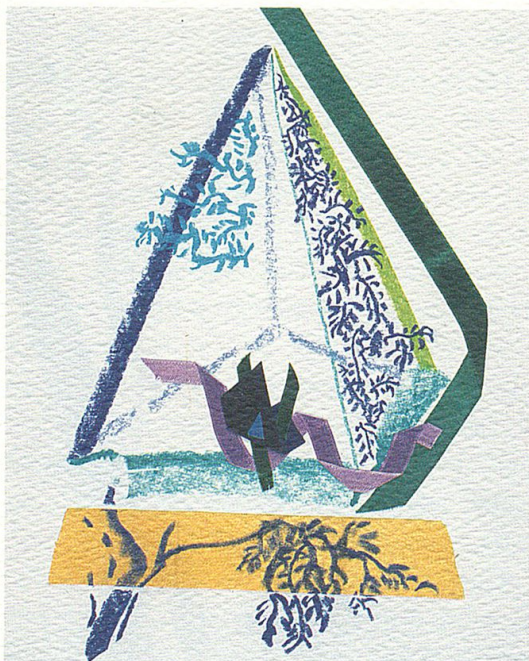
My grandmother called and asked my father, the second ex-husband of her only daughter, to send us to her so we could see her family home. He put us on a bus. My brother and I stared out the window, silently wondering when the ride would end and how we would know where to get off. Our fears grew in quiet intensity as the afternoon turned to evening and the evening to night, and all the other passengers left us at stops along the way. Where was this place we were going? As children, we had not yet developed the ability, so familiar and comforting to adults, to assign meaning to the passage of time and distance. Finally, we pulled into a small, dimly lit station; the driver turned and grunted; we found Grandma outside the door.

It was cold, I remember, and our clothing was not warm enough. We had a long drive in the dark to the house. It was small, close to the street, hemmed in by an outcropping of rock across the road, and filled with rooms that seemed too small for an adult, but perfect for a child of my age and size. The lighting was all florescent and gave the house an otherworldly quality, as if it were a set for an old movie. My grandmother warmed us with a late supper, and then we climbed the long, steep and narrow stairway to an unfamiliar yet comforting bed.

The next day I saw the stream out back. I was disappointed, expecting from my grandmother's stories to find a real river, with deep pools for swimming, and broad expanses for skating. Instead, I found a trickle of water nearly hidden by overgrowing brush. She took us to see slate quarries piled high with mounds of rubble, and then we went to town to get boots and gloves. I was so used, even at this young age, to the shiny newness of a big city; everything here was awash in the grey tones of decay, as if it might cave in on itself at any moment, like something that had died already. The weather was grey as well, as if the sun were too tired to shine, and the cold too tired to snow. Yet I felt comforted and enclosed; the dullness offered me private places to hide and quiet hollows in which to think.

As my grandmother's mind gave way to age, her distant past became more familiar, more real, and certainly more comforting than anything from the previous thirty or forty years of her life. Her recent past had brought little happiness and much tragedy; so she skipped back through time to her life as a lovely young woman and filled my ears with stories of her childhood. She told me often she wanted to move back east, that she had grown to hate the West--what was once the golden coast for her. But she was afraid of the grey and enveloping cold, afraid it would be too much for her.

She died 100 years after her eldest sister had been born. In the East, we were in the season of slow decay and quiet death, the season I have come to know and love as a dark refuge from the other parts of the year, the season that was absent from my childhood. She died quietly, in her sleep, a few days after a minor heart attack. There was no service because no one was left to come. She had outlived all of her sisters, her husband, her two children; and her fierce independence and distrusting nature had precluded having friends.



My brother took care of her affairs. She had told us that she had everything taken care of--she didn't want us to do for her what she had had to do for others--but in fact, she had left many details undone. She had purchased a burial plot for herself next to her husband, but that had already been given to her daughter, my mother. She had bought herself another, but it was up over the hill, alone, isolated. My brother and I both detested the idea of a coffin, so he had her cremated.

Her ashes sat in the funeral home for some weeks while we decided what to do with them. My brother suggested sending the ashes to me: having me take them to the home where she was born and put them in the river out back.

"You know," he said, "she had so many happy memories of that place. And she kept talking about wanting to move back there. Maybe that is where she would be happiest."

I said nothing.

I kept thinking of the "river." My memory of it was so different than hers. It's only a stream, I wanted to remind him--and a small one at that, barely visible, hardly noticeable. I could not imagine how she could have skated on it or swum in it. It was too small, too ignoble; there would be no grandeur in that kind of burial.

And I did not want to go.

I did not want the job of driving to where she had been born, of trying to reconcile her memories with what I would be seeing, of bringing her life full circle, of easing her to sleep in the place she had first awakened. But I said nothing.

And so the ashes sat and waited.

And strangely, while she waited, I did go.

It was the photograph that compelled me. I was walking down the stairs, having just come up on some minor errand, when I stopped, each foot on a different step, and gazed deeply at the photograph. In the image, my grandmother is the one sitting on the edge of the porch. She is turned away from the photographer, so I could not see her face. My mother, the four-year-old, also has her back to the photographer and to me. She is tugging on a strand of hair, much as I did as a child and still do. Suddenly, I wanted so much to see their faces.



And so I got in my car and drove. The path was familiar. I used to drive it all the time when my husband and I were first in love and dating long distance. But then my travels had always just skirted the town where my grandmother was born. All along the route, every few miles, a road sign marked my progress, telling me how far I had left to go: 27 miles, 22 miles, 16 miles, 5 miles . . . I passed the road where I had always turned to the West, towards what was once my home, and instead continued south. Passing by a grocery store, a mobile home park, a VFW post, and a discount beverage store, I came upon a spacious town green. I drove around it, slowly, looking at all the huge, gracious brick buildings lining the streets. Now they housed a used clothing store, a pizza parlor, a place to rent videos.

During the previous year, my grandmother had called me often, usually with some urgent but inappropriate message like "Happy Birthday," when in fact the date had passed months before. Once I had asked her the address of her family home.

"46 River Street!" She had said it with the glee of a child, so proud that she could remember. I had repeated the number and the name over and over in my mind, as if I were cramming for a test, committing this small fact to memory, thinking I might need it at a later date.

As I left the town green, the road sloped down towards some railroad tracks and I thought, "A river is always at the bottom of a hill." I turned east onto the road and the street sign jumped into view: "River Street." I passed over a bridge but never really saw the river. It was too small, hidden by its own banks, far below the road. I looked not for the house, but for the outcropping of rock I remembered from my childhood visit. It was there, about one-half mile away, almost in the street itself; just beyond, on the opposite side of the road, was the house.

It was small, quaint, white, with baby-blue shutters. There was no porch, but there were white lacy curtains in the windows. I drove on past the house for another mile, then turned and came back. A huge pine tree grew in the yard, just where the Model-T in the photograph had been. It offered some privacy from which to watch the house, so I pulled to the side of the road. The front door was open, but I saw no one. I thought the house had been sold to my grandmother's niece when her youngest sister had died, but I didn't know. And there was no one left for me to ask. A few cars drove by, their occupants cautiously watching me watching the house.

I waited for something to happen but was relieved when nothing did. The house looked like a million other small Victorian farmhouses. It didn't even look like the one in the photograph. But it was the same house, and I tried to picture my grandmother here as a young girl playing in the yard; as a teenager, fighting with her mother; then as a woman, returning to visit, proud of her marriage, her two young children, her husband with the exciting job out west. None of these women was the grandmother I knew, but I tried to find her here.

I watched and after some moments--as if I were slowly releasing a long-held breath--my body relaxed. I restarted the car and drove on.

My brother decided to stay close to our grandmother's intentions and bury her ashes in the same plot with her husband and daughter. He packed up her things--there was not much left by now--and shipped me a few pieces of furniture she had wanted me to have: a small table and a rocker that had belonged to her grandmother.

He also sent me two large boxes filled with photographs. There were many of my mother and uncle as children. These I remembered having seen throughout my childhood. There were also many of my grandmother's youth that I had never seen before: she and her sisters at the piano, she on horseback, or brazenly showing off her waist-length, wavy chestnut hair.

I found a photograph of my grandmother's mother, a portrait taken when she was in her twenties. I had never seen a photo of her so young. She was strikingly beautiful with a familiar look to her eyes--they were large and round, with a vague darkness about them, as if they were perpetually lit with the colors of dusk. I set this image aside. I found a photo of my grandmother at about the same age, and then one of my mother as well.

I was surprised at the depth of the similarities. Each woman was unique and yet carried the stamp of the other. They were all beautiful with the same strength of features, the same twilight around the eyes; something very powerful had been passed on.

When I looked in my grandmother's eyes, I saw some of her demanding dominance; people often turned away from her as if they might be struck. In my mother's eyes, I saw a raw intensity. This feral energy made people lean towards her as if into an oncoming wind. Yet predominant in these photos were all the beauty



and youthful grace that had been passed from one woman to another. I wondered if my eyes matched theirs. I considered getting a photograph of myself and placing it at the end of the line, of making it a foursome, seeing if the quality I saw in the others was visible in myself. But I was stopped by some fear, as if I were on a walk and, seeing that dusk was approaching, found myself afraid of continuing and yet not ready to return home.

I turned away from the women on the dresser and was faced with my own face staring at me from a mirror on the opposite wall. I stalled, taken aback by seeing myself with the clarity of the unexpected. I stared long and unashamedly into my own features, frozen in self-contemplation. I saw some things that were easy to identify--my father in the shape of my mouth, my grandmother in the color of my hair, my mother in the squareness of my jaw. But the character of my eyes eluded me. I looked for their depths, but felt as if I were trying to see water down the long dark shaft of an old well.

I was unsure if I wanted to see what might be there. I feared that if I found any of the beauty, youth, passion and intelligence that I saw in the women in the photographs, I would also find all the sadness, anger and self-destructiveness that had ruined their lives. I had travelled 3,000 miles to escape all that was in these women's eyes. I had looked for a quiet, peaceful place to rest, far away from the heat and light that had kept me agitated as a child. I thought I had found success by discovering a world similar to that described in my childhood copy of 'Heidi.'

But my journey had taken me farther than I had anticipated. In discovering the world of my childhood dreams, I had inadvertently landed on the shores of my grandmother's youth and rediscovered in these women's eyes the burning intensity I had tried to leave behind. They stared at me from the dresser, offering me a challenge not only to accept what I found in their faces, but to see it in my own.

Laurel Saville