

July 2014

Oswald Humanities: Creative First Place: Elephant Memories: A Set of Poems

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Recommended Citation

Sims, Heather (2013) "Oswald Humanities: Creative First Place: Elephant Memories: A Set of Poems," *Kaleidoscope*: Vol. 11, Article 16.

Available at: <http://uknowledge.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/vol11/iss1/16>

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Introduction

This collection is an exploration of my memories. My mother has always teased me for being the elephant of the family; I remember details of things that others forget. These poems are my view of some of the important events in my life: my introduction to words, my discovery and concealment of my bisexuality, and the three deaths that weigh the most heavily on my elephant memories.

Pan

"...the moment you doubt whether you can fly, you cease forever to be able to do it."
— J.M. Barrie

I remember
my mother's breath,
like her words
brushing against my ears.

I remember
my darling mother's tongue
fox trotting behind
her igloo-stacked teeth.

I remember
devouring the words she spoke,
like the crocodile
consuming Hook.

I remember
watching her delicate hands
play the lines like violin strings—
pausing as she fondly savored each period.

I remember
the pleasantly provocative words
enchancing my tongue,
calling for enunciation.

I remember
how they wanted
to tangle themselves
in the magnetic glitter of white teeth.

I remember
my mind melting
into each blushing symbol;
mixing sound and syllable.

Even in my slumber
They echo,
tempting and lonely,
"I can fly!"

The Wayward Daughter

Not all who wander are lost
-JRR Tolkein

I've walked so many streets.
I've trudged along so many miles.
I've seen every tree,
 every brick,
 every sun
 of this country
and still I wander.

I've slept so many nights.
I've tripped along so many dreams.
I've spent every moment,
 every day,
 every year
 of this life
and still I wander.

I've spoken so many words.
I've written along so many lines.
I've read every sign,
 every look,
 every breath
 of this place
and still I wander.

I've drawn so many faces.
I've stood along so many loves.
I've memorized every cell,
 every pore,
 every flush
 of this body
and still I wander.

Witness

We hide in the darkness of backstage curtains
ropes and cables and ghosts of those before us—
the only witnesses.

My lips quiver as I trace paths
along the goose pimpled skin of her neck.
My fingers strain to memorize the lines of ink
that doodle across her pale as parchment flesh.
Our lips part in sweet silent gasps,
mouthing the words “I love you”
and crossing our fingers that no one saw.

Quickly readjusting my skirt
and checking her make-up
before taking our spots on stage.
Her performing Juliet;
me playing her nurse.

1988-2011

There's a grave house—settled in an open field,
situated in Rutherford County,
tucked into the Blue Ridge of North Carolina.

There's a grave house—defined by a square headstone,
simply carved, adorned by a single horse,
bridled and saddled, waiting for his rider.

There's a grave house—roofed in tin,
to sing the mountain rains.
Closed to the elements by a Dutch door,
the interior walls lit by a central sky light.

There's a grave house—built of wood,
grayed and rain-worn, square and even;
given by the barn, to shelter the site
of her taken-too-soon grave.

There's a grave house—carrying her memories:
photographs from her last birthday,
from the first time she rode a horse,
of her first dorm room...the five of us piled in it,
of her sorority sisters, copies of her own prints;
converted to Cyanotype, printed on feed bags,
— shrouding the walls.

There's a grave house—guarding the tomb
of Linda and Paul's daughter,
of Megan's sister, of my dearest friend:

Our Beloved Katelyn

13 Years

*...where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence
you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.*

-Sam Beckett, The Unnamable

The phone screams me awake.
I roll over and glare at it,
vaguely registering the sound
of my mom lifting the living room receiver.

Yes, I'm his granddaughter.

I sit up, listening closely.

Yes, I understand.

My mother's voice wavers.

Alright.

A short silence.

Yes.

Thank you.

The silence stretches...

The receiver does not slump
back into its cradle.

I slip from my bed,
careful to not squeak the mattress springs.
I can see my mother from my bedroom door:
the receiver in her left hand,
barely held by the tips of her fingers.

I don't have to ask who called;
the man who raised her is gone,
my great-grandfather.

I tiptoe down the hall,
take the phone from my mother's hand
and set it noiselessly on the arm rest.
Her fingers recoil from my bed-warm skin
brushing hers.
I sink to the floor,
resting my head on her knee.

We do not speak.

Nor does my father, when he joins us.
He lifts the receiver as though to hang it up,
pausing, before placing it back on the armrest.

I watch my mother's lips open
then close again,
not a single sound passing them.

My father shakes his head,
like me, he already knows:
her grandfather, father,
has died.

The silence envelops us,
sinks deep into our bones
and holds there.

13 years have passed,
and we have yet
to whisper his name:
June Cosby

Remember

I clasp Andrew's small hand in mine,
leading my youngest cousin
out into the cool Carolinian sun,
down the worn, creaking porch steps
and into backyard, crowded with black-clad family.

He tugs at his dark blue suit jacket,
the sun making him squint as he looks to me.
"Off?" he asks, for the third time.
"Soon, little man," I murmur,
as I lead him up the middle aisle
to our seat in the front row
next to his father, my uncle.
Picking up the program from my chair,
I lift Andrew into my lap.
He reaches for the paper, "Please?"
I hand it over, listening
as he mumbles and laughs
in his happy toddler manner
as the pages rustle from the wind
blowing up from the dock.

My father steps behind the podium,
dragging his fingers up the angle
of the sundial urn planted in the center of the yard
(where it will get the best light,
no matter the time)
and clears his throat.

Andrew looks up, waving at his uncle,
"Look," he squeals, pointing to the picture
on the program's front cover, "it's mommy!"
Tears prick my eyes as I gently hush him.

My father, chuckles quietly.
"Yes, Andrew," he says, raising his tear-raw voice
so it carries across the yard,
across our seated family and friends,
"That is your mommy.
And my sister.
And your dad's wife.
And my daughters' aunt.
And someone special to all of us."

He pauses, taking a shaky breath,
"That was the thing about Robin;
she was always special,
no matter who she was meeting
or what she was doing,
she brought light to it, to us."

I exhale slowly, silently praying
along with my father's eulogy .
I draw Andrew closer to me,
"Remember, little man."