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Two Essays · Rochelle Nameroff

BACKYARD

*And Cain went out from the
presence of the Lord, and
dwelt in the land of Nod,
on the east of Eden.*

ALL RIGHT, so I'm starting from the basement. It's one of those old-fashioned basements, made for utility, not recreation—white circular wash machine and hand wringer next to divided grey sinks, and a grey cement floor where the water ran down to a hole in it. There must have been a plug or a stopper though I don't remember. Then, I suppose, it went somewhere under the house, soapy and grey and hot. Dirty and clean, dirty and clean. Could it just keep going?

To the right, another grey room, also hot, the coal furnace. It wasn't much of a room, just space for the furnace, its pipes and its feeder. I think of it now as a metal tree trunk, all gashed and seen from the middle, with fire instead of sap going upward. I was its feeder. I'd lift up the heavy metal door from its latch and swing it wide, and lean back as far as I could to avoid what might swipe out at me. Then I'd grab the fluted shovel and bend left to the coal bin.

Ah, the coal bin. Why I loved coal I don't know, but I loved it. All those gleaming shiny lumps that rolled and changed position, filling in the hole the shovel left behind. I loved the feel of coal in my hand, like a hard silky vegetable. I loved the word *coal*, warm and echoing, as if by itself it could transform the underlying cold. And I even loved the velvety film it would deposit on my hands, though today, the carbon stain of a typewriter ribbon will make me wash and wash until my fingers emerge wrinkled and grey.

And the lovely growl of it rolling down the chute. When the coalmen came to pour it through a backyard window into its small wooden pen near the furnace, I would stand around and watch, ecstatic as James Dean seeing his father's lettuce ride the stolen boards down into the train in *East of Eden*. Was I in a movie back then too, frame after frame rushing by, inevitable, darkened?

Outside was the snow, a whole shroud of it, though when I think of my backyard world it is seldom winter. Instead I see my small Monarch bike in the corner under the window, peacock blue, a color I chose over the ordinary reds and greys, with white balloon tires and a big rusty bell. The entire bike is rusty but who cares? It is my ticket to the alleys and the streets that fan out so orderly there is no question of destination. *Where are you going? Around the block.* And then?

Next to the bike, a brick wall keeps tabs on the continuous ball bouncing contests I have with myself. By hand or with racket I play myself off against myself. I think myself double, though I am not divided as yet. There is me and there is me. Long beyond sunset, when my arm must have judged the low bounce by its sound, I keep count. How many I don't remember, for it must not have been winning but a kind of trance that was the goal, a place where the body was continuous, a calm liquid machine. I did not care to get better, just to arrive.

My big brother Larry and I played games when he was forced to, though I secretly think he enjoyed his baby sister as shadow. Baseball was a passion our family shared, baseball and music, happy noisy interruptions to the larger sentence of silence and anger. The Braves were new to Milwaukee, and I, nothing but loyal; my mother, loyal to her own relinquished childhood, was a Brooklyn Dodgers fan; and Larry, quite choosy, for St. Louis. We were a National League family, and I remember dividing the country like two teams: the National League was the Democratic Party and NBC; the hated American League, the stuffy Republicans and wealthy CBS. How can I root now for the Brewers when they are an American League team? Hometown ties are supposed to be greater than those of class, or are ties to the underdog the largest bond of all, a form of justice, a kind of rebel joy? I do not understand these silly loyalties.

And how did just two kids play baseball? I remember the rules; you probably played like this too. Catch it on a bounce or a fly and you're out. The garage window broken, the game is over. Generic rules, no? The greatest baseball lesson my brother deigned to teach was to bat like Stan Musial, his hero. I learned how to go into The Stan Musial Crouch, a phrase I thought of like the title of a song or dance. First you held the bat tight onto your shoulders as you hunched forward, ass sticking out. Then you gave a little wiggle and wound yourself downward like a corkscrew. I couldn't do it without laughing, and my brother excused my blasphemy as

just dumb girl stuff. Later I took his old football, which we used to kick over the electric wire, and cut it open to see what made it so big. What was dumb about that?

But mostly it wasn't lessons for me or a generic you. Mostly I was alone, with the hammock and its rusty lines in the grass, and the many insects, and the flowers. A paradise of flowers. Still I think of my past as the wish to move on.

The only flower I hated was the geranium. My father, on his sometime visits, would bring large flats of flowers—pansies and petunias and geraniums—which would then be planted in borders around the house. Other than its effeminate name, which we mocked, hand on hip and fingers pinching the nose, the petunias were surprising in color and sprawled, heedful of pattern. The pansies I particularly liked for their delicate velvet and their faces, which I used to think alternately catlike and Chinese, old male Chinese with hidden bedroom slippers somewhere under the ground. But the geraniums? Ugh. They stayed where they were put, smug in their holes, and smelled like potatoes. Their stems had rusty old hairs all up and down. Man-made objects I think they are, like linoleum and naugahyde.

In spring though, the only scent that can immediately bring me back Wisconsin is the lilac, my favorite. Purple and white bushes, across from the garage, next to the ashbox where I would sit and watch the garbage-men. Generous and ethereal, the lilacs came back year after year despite what hell went on in our household. I used to carry whole handfuls to my teachers at school, passing up the magenta peonies with their basketball roses crawling with ants, passing up the wild roses themselves, trestled under the eaves where the wasp nest waited. Lilacs, a promise every year until they were cut down for my brother's blue Chevy to park on. For a long time, later, in the new heaven of California, I would call the hanging wisteria *false lilac* and refuse to learn its name. Or the other dark one, jacaranda, I would name *purple tree*, and leave it at that. So what if they colored like bruises. I say that was not the attraction. Flowers are the carpeting of paradise.

I look in a book about flowers to justify my faith, expecting Eden. I open to a section about carnations, not a flower I really like, thinking *paper* and *proms*, not promise, not destination, but because it's the first page to open to me, must be significant. I do not believe in this of course. Nor do I disbelieve in chance. So. According to Korean lore, the carnation can foretell the future. I am hooked on this kind of narration.

A cluster of three blossoms is placed in the hair; if the top one dries out first, the last years of life will be fraught with difficulty; if the second, one's youth will be terrible. If all three flowers dry at the same time, life will be altogether miserable. Of course, since the flowers are bound to dry out sooner or later, it is hard to get good news by this method.

Flowers! As if one is capable of blossom. *The beautiful must show an image of survival* I would later write, talking about the seductive and poisonous jellyfish, and anemones in the living garden of the sea. But I was thinking instead of punishment, the beatings I got as a child. Was this the real backyard back then? Was this the underside of childhood? Beatings with a long leather belt, no buckle and no sins, but a continuous sharp count. One and one and one, until numbers meant nothing but endurance. This wasn't a role I had chosen. This wasn't a contest I could win. My hair grabbed then with one of her hands as the other, like a machine gone delirious, kept slapping. And the words I refuse to remember out loud, though they are tattoo-like. The low shameful wish for protection. Why must one excavate the past? I take a mirror out to the garden, looking to the world for explanation. How to grow into oneself follows me everywhere like a shadow no real sun has made.

Some augury predict my future? Not true. All the world seemed ahead of me as I walked home from school the last half day of school, meandering through the alley, moving toward summer. Ahead of me, not behind, though I can miss the past in such detail as to make me little again in front of a giant dark screen. How did I know I might walk backwards too, though I would drift out my door, past my neighborhood, and across the continent?

Lots of us drifted then to California, to paradise, now west of the land of Nod. Perhaps I should say migrated, following the way the mutant genetic code would read, a modern fossil, playing out our role in a movie written later. The poet Charles Wright says that poetry should reminisce about the future. To some it is a horror to replicate the past, though a horror that is shadowed with desire. And so I went, the bad kid, one of the lucky ones, off to enter my life.