

Heather Sullivan – Three Poems

Blockade

My father took two things very seriously,
the Navy and the South. As children, we
learned to admire the immaculate dress

whites under the dry cleaning bag plastic,
but to never touch. We were respectful to
his crazy mother, the grandmother who

sent our Christmas checks taped to her
church program, each highlighted paragraph
a not so subtle clue to our inequities. After

their divorce, Mom used to say that her
genes cancelled his out, and so we stopped
talking about half our history, pretending

instead that we sprang from her thigh, the
distance from him making it easier to outrun
his anger. To discuss missing lineage now is

akin to sitting in the bathroom with the door
blocked, looking at the vintage Playboys he
used to hide in the bottom of his t-shirt

drawer. We whisper about Meade County,
Kentucky and Ireland before that, what it means
to be Southern and if we're even allowed to

pretend. To acknowledge the other half of the
whole, means bearing witness to the complete
picture. You can't play at confederacy without

feeling his hard hands just at the edge of your
shoulders, the fear rising from your stomach,
knowing that you are capable of terrible things.

Do-Bee

When Miss Nancy would hold up
her magic mirror, I'd cross my
fingers and toes, hold my breath,
beg her to say my name. I wanted
my will to be strong enough for
her to see me over the thousand
miles and through the television
glass. If she would see me, I could
wrap my name around the hurts
and pocket it against my father's
threats, a madstone to ward off
his poison. You're just like her in
every way. She's ugly, nothing.
I beg to differ, would be my reply,
for Miss Nancy has shown me
the way, the truth and the life.
You see, I have this here stone in
my pocket, this blessing and this
curse. The first name you picked
from the choices she gave you,
coupled with your gift of assimilation,
this last name, the only pleasant
touch you ever gave. More than
the sum of my parts, I exorcise your
demon, so that I might enjoy my
milk and cookies in peace.
Miss Nancy never rescued me, nor
did she wash me clean in proper
deportment. She saved Michael
and Kelly and Jimmy and Kathleen,
while Mom taped an emergency
quarter inside my backpack, so I
would always be able to call home.

Slipping

All the climbing structures
at the playground were
made out of wood.
I remember a pirate ship,
a crazy jungle gym,
all beside a lake.

The perimeter of each ringed
with wooden stepping stones of
various heights.
I was testing myself,
jumping from one
to another,
stretching.
I slipped.
Taking the full impact to my chest,
I lost my breath and at that moment,
thought I was dying.
The clarity of my final moments
as a nine year old
looking out on the water.
And then my mother was there.
Picking me up,
saying my name over and over while
checking for broken bones.
Finding me satisfactory,
I was told to finish up as we were leaving
in fifteen minutes.
On the swings,
my father would pull us up
to shoulder height,
we would torpedo
down again and again.
Screaming,
holding on for dear life,
I knew never to
let go.
One night,
years later,
her heart went into atrial fibrillation,
refused to slow down.
In my room,
I asked God over and over to
let her live.
That night,
He listened.

Heather A. Sullivan's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Chiron Review*, *Open Letters Monthly*, *Free State Review*, *Yellow Chair Review* and *Ygdrasil*. She is an editor at *Live Nude Poems* and maintains a blog at www.ladyjaneadventures.blogspot.com. She lives with her family in Revere, MA.