

Marianne Peel – Three Poems

Huckleberries and Boilo

Her fingers always smelled of cabbage
when she made the Halupkis on Saturday night.
She'd plunge her hands into that boiling water
slivering out the core of the cabbage,
unafraid of the blade.

I used to think her fingertips
must be callused hard
scalded beyond
all sensation
the way she manhandled those cabbage leaves.

Her fingernails were stubbly squares and I wondered
how she managed to wrap them around that bottle of homebrewed Boilo,
that Boilo that burned my nose hairs when I took a whiff
that Boilo that she slugged down between folding the ground pork and sticky rice
into a cabbage bundle, raw pig in a blanket.

Long ago she was a young widow,
a dress shirt presser whose heavy steel iron
smoothed out the blood clots her husband hacked up.
The checks for the Black Lung came on the first of the month.
I used to find them, damp, in her apron pocket.

She told me it was *damn hard to fall asleep once he passed*.
She used to parcel her going to sleep
into measures of his wheezing.
She could count on that syncopation
to soothe her off to sleep.

She became an insomniac after he was dead and buried,
recycled his handkerchiefs into rags
to polish the toaster,
to spit shine her shoes,
to dab at her lipstick that oozed the corners of her mouth.

They found her
one fine summer morning
when the mountain laurel was in bloom.
She'd gone picking huckleberries up the side of the mountain,
collected them in a rusted tin coffee can.

She used to like the sound of the berries clanging in that can.
Counted them till the sun made her dizzy
and she climbed back down the mountain.
Her old sundress, all covered in closing-go-to-sleep flowers,
was hung on the bathroom door over her acetate powder blue nightgown.

They found her in the bathtub all sunk down and comfortable
with a cigarette still burning on the edge of the tub
and a glass of Boilo rippling through the bathwater,
her fingers still stained bluish purple,
the huckleberries still on her hands.

The Methodist Preacher's Wife

I knew a woman who saved vacuum cleaner bags,
shoved them into the basement rafters
as protection from drafts that erupt through ceiling cracks
against the tide of cold that creaked through
this old preacher's house.

On rainy days
she would wiggle one bag out
line her carpeted floor with discarded ads from the A & P
and then unfold the accordion pleat that had kept
what had been sucked up sealed in.

She wanted to find lost things
backs of earrings
bobby pins from recitals where rigid buns were required
glittering jewels from the beagle's collar
eggshell fragments from Ukrainian Easter masterpieces.

Once she found a thread from Nana's old quilt
silver like the spiraled uncontrollable hair wires
that now emerged from her scalp.
She wanted to thread it through the quilt,
repair what had unraveled.

Once she found the back of her Edward's tie pin,
the one awarded to him on his silver anniversary.
Sermons to churn out every Saturday night.
Twenty- five years wearing a pressed white shirt and striped ties.
He liked the narrow ones, slender and faded, like him.

Once she found an incisor, dried blood crusting the edges.
The one her daughter lost that time
Jumping on the bed during a pillow fight.
Her heels slid off the edge. She landed hard, her chin slamming
The floor, the tooth flying out of her mouth.

Once she found half of a locket, the back side of the heart.
A black and white photo of Aunt Mary, hair all blurred around her face before she
succumbed to colon cancer,
before she spent days in bobby pin spit curls, sitting out under the Linden tree
with a plastic mug of Vernors and Jim Bean in her hand,
counting sparrows, painting her nails summer convertible red.

You never know what treasure you will find
In dust and dirt.

Happy Hour at P.F. Chang's

When he asks me why I piled the green peppers
into the side bowl
I want to tell him the truth:
That they repeat on me, make me belch.
That my middle age gut cannot handle them anymore.

Instead, I tell him I just don't like them,
that I forgot to order the cashew almond chicken
minus the peppers.
I don't tell the truth,
because he leaned in when he took my order.

Because he pointed out tasty items,
touched them on the menu, between my hands.
Because he sat down next to me.
Because he mixed just the right amount
of hot mustard in the special sauce to make it sizzle.

These college boys are well-trained
to romance the middle-aged clientele.
They never ask *Just one?* when they seat me here.
They don't make me feel alone and lonely on a Monday night.
Poor lady, eating all by herself. Not here.

I could sit here for hours,
sampling exotic teas
and maybe order a mai tai. Or two.

I could practice picking up cashew pieces
with my chopsticks.

I know he is schooled to look at me hungrily, to whet my appetite
with the five o'clock shadow beard
that other reputable restaurants do not allow,
to look at me with those *I want to dance* eyes.
Calls me "miss" not "m'am."

He keeps coming back, refilling my Passion Fruit tea.
Leaning in.
He doesn't seem to mind
that the sauce from the lettuce wraps
oozes down my fingers, onto my wrists even.
My fortune cookie tells me
You will soon be surrounded by good friends and laughter.
Again, he returns to my table.
Lingering. Leaning in.
Asking me if I am satisfied.

Perhaps I will stay for dessert.

Marianne Peel taught English at middle and high school for 32 years. She is now retired, doing Field Instructor work for Michigan State University. In addition, Marianne has been published in *Encodings: A Feminist Literary Journal*; *Write to Heal*; *Writing for Our Lives: Our Bodies—Hurts, Hungers, Healing*; *Mother Voices*, *Metropolitan Woman Magazine*, *Ophelia's Mom* and *Remembered Arts Journal*. Peel also received Fulbright-Hays Awards to Nepal and Turkey. She is a flute playing vocalist, learning to play ukulele, who is raising four daughters. She shares her life with her partner Scott, whom she met in Istanbul while studying in Turkey. Peel also taught teachers in Guizhou Province, China for three summers, and she also toured several provinces in China with the Valpraiso Symphony, playing both flute and piccolo, in January of 2016. Most recently, Marianne was invited to participate in Marge Piercy's Juried Intensive Poetry Workshop in June 2016.