

Three Poems by Mary Jo Balestreri

Showing My Granddaughter A Portrait Of My Friend Before She Was Famous

Water skiers wave in a froth of foam
on the glossy ocean. She stands
on the sand like a cutout imposed on the glitz.

In a rare glimpse of the bikinied model,
she mislays her fifth position training,
feet anchored as securely as square knots.
Arms hang with no finesse at her side, shoulders
droop like white sails in a windless sea.
Her eyes scan something in the distance, a ruse
still used today, but her look is not
the self-conscious pose of the experienced,
but the wary look of the child.

She is fourteen, a natural blonde, not yet the icon
she would become. Not yet the free
and androgynous
symbol of the ideal sixties' woman. Unguarded
in this frozen moment, she is awkward and looks
under-nourished, a teenager who is closer
in appearance to a long-necked shore bird
rather than the sensually curved body of a dolphin.

Who would have guessed she was a
beginning and an end,
the name-calling she hated would immortalize her.
That the curvy look was on its way out,

the pointed breasts, the pointy shoes.
Thin would be the new luxury.

No one looks as detached and uncomfortable
as this twiggy limb of a girl in her
black and white swim suit,
but the camera man knows.

On the Historic Register

His words weave in and out among muted voices
from the past, my Gramma's piano, Caruso's tenor,
the gramophone and The Voice of the Master.
The scratchy red labels spin round and round.
We dance, laugh with cousins, aunts, uncles,
the big house on Park Point, my grandparents
gathering place. My first home.

The present owner, a history teacher, has offered
to take me through the house. As he talks, memory
accompanies him to the kitchen where in
the warmth
of the yellow breakfast room, I am again a
small child.

I look out the window and see Grandpa bend
over his hoe,
battered straw hat at a rakish angle on his
bald head.
He unwinds wily twine for tomatoes and
hollyhocks,
allows them to climb together.

Gramma, across the room from me, stands at
the chipped stone
sink, where splashes of water and the ping in
the colander
play music of just-picked raspberries. I
watch her snitch
the ruby fruit, pop it in her mouth from the
tin pail

when she thinks I'm not looking.

Over here by the stairs, the milkman delivers
small glass bottles,
sets them on the scarred trestle table where I
skim thick cream
off the top. On the linoleum counter,
Gramma stacks homemade
bread ready to toast and lather with jellies
and jams.

When I ask what happened to the outside stairs he
replies
how dangerous they were, that they had to be
removed.

As he continues to speak, I linger on those
weathered
stairs,
playing paper dolls, listening to Gramma's
stories
of Ireland as she peels potatoes.
I listen to the crunch of the raw spuds she
gives me.

The owner shows me the ancient maple where
Grandpa hung my tire
swing. Crows scold from the tree as they always
did, but in the place
where late summer bloomed through the open
window, five condos
rise from the ground. As I thank him and walk to
my car,

a knot tightens in my chest. I think of the way
doctors say

Her reality's gone. It's only in her mind.

Mary Jo Balestreri has two books of poetry, *Joy in the Morning* and *gathering the harvest* published by Bellowing Ark Press. A chapbook, *Best Brothers*, will be here in May by Tiger's Eye Press. Mary Jo is widely published, has three Pushcart nominations and two Best of the Net. She is a founding member of "Grace River Poets," an outreach for schools, churches, women's shelters. Please visit her at maryjobalistreripoet.com

Gramma's Kitchen

A sunny morning, late spring.
I sit at the table. A warm raspberry breeze
teases the yellow gingham curtains.
On the counter of the old enamel sink,
strawberries and rhubarb drain
in the meshed colander.

In her checked, homemade apron,
Gramma dusts the breadboard with flour
about to make pies for supper.
She smells of cinnamon sweet rolls.

I watch while stirring Ovaltine,
sniff the aroma, pretend it is coffee.
I am also in charge of the toaster,
the old-fashioned kind with doors.
It's tricky turning the bread without burning
myself but Gramma treats me like an adult.

We talk to each other as we do our chores.
She whispers secrets, tells me about her girlhood
in Ireland, even the bad things.
I think I am her favorite.

A sunny morning at Gramma's, late spring.
It is a sunflower day.
Fifty-eight years later, I still bask
in that explosion of yellow.

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