

Winter's Tale

Beside her bed but out of sight
She kept the fairy stories
 of her native land.
Some day she thought
Some day in Autumn
 when the weather
Is quite right,
Ripe but not hot
I'll go.

For in her heart
She wanted to be Queen
Although she kept the purpose
 dark
And to that end
She plotted fierce assassinations
 in her mind,
Murdered common places
One at a foul time.

Occasionally she went to gaol.
Here she read the stories over
Found that in tale after tale
The queens were old or cruel
The princesses honey young
With gems in their eyes
And jewels like plums of pleasure
 on their tongues.

Steadfast she reminded
Her desire reaffirmed.
She wanted to be Queen
Albeit she recognized
 the apple in the worm.
Whether cold, or old, or mean.
She wanted to be Queen.
Queens were forever
Princesses were not real.

This you see
Was all the shelter
 she could seize;
Knowing princesses, no matter
 how they please
Princesses, are not forever.
Only Queens are real.

Marya Fiamengo

waited for. The little red foxes on the Welland bypass, the looming of Whitman's naive silhouette behind Burlington's Stelco's smokepiles, the smell of hickory wood at the junction of highway 6 and the QEW. And I knew you loved these moments too.

This will sound strange to you but I was NEVER sure that you were going to come out alive, to come out right. Always frightened you might decide to toss back into eternity.

Yet the afternoon you came, you also stayed. Now that you are not a part of me anymore but a baby in a cradle, separate, wise, beaming, farting, frowning and hiccuping, rubbing your tiny fists together or sucking all five fingers, I am not surprised anymore. But I felt uncertain then. What shocked me also was the importance you acquired after your birth. I never hesitated to put my life — and I guess yours — in danger just to be with your brother. I had to brave the snow and the ice to spend my evenings with him. He was the absolute priority over everything, work, sleep, rough roads, you. Now I am more uncertain as to which — or whom — I would choose.

But we did it, you and I. We made it together. You had the marvellous grace to arrive on a Saturday morning, after the completion of my Friday's work, and when you pounded at my door at 6 AM I briefly wished you had given me more time to sleep. Let us make a deal. Please go to sleep. What could I give you in exchange?

You did not answer, you were very determined, I could tell then that your body had a clear will of its own. It was as strong, as fierce, as authoritative as a giant. I felt very powerless, totally exhausted, ready to lie down and cry. I remember wishing we both were in a different land. Near a hill or an orchard of olive trees. If only there had not been so much snow around us! I could have cuddled up against the warm bark or leaned against a sunny rock and everything would have been easier.

Your father and I started calculating the miles, the minutes, the intervals. I was the old geometrician pacing up the palace's stones. Precision and measure. A compass, a ruler, Arabic numbers. But suddenly you tore across my stomach and shook me the way hurricanes run over the windward islands. I was a dark slave, forgotten in child labour on the old city's sidewalks.

Later people were surprised when I told them I wished I had had my whole family of friends with me to celebrate your coming. Some would limit these festivities to a spouse. I wanted everybody I loved. I needed them there. To lean against them. Not all of them made it but as your wise brother would say 'you cannot have everything you want.'

After covering those long miles between Buffalo and Hamilton for the third time in a day it was quite a relief to be left alone in a quiet room. Or almost alone, for I could hear some voices coming from be-

hind the curtain. A faceless couple were whispering over what looked like a little white bundle. I drowned myself into their soft reassuring voices. I savoured the peaceful ordinariness of their words.

—Do you think she looks like your mother?

—Well, the eyebrows maybe . . .

—Did you notice her long nails?

—No, I haven't. I never notice people's nails.

Then I walked to the labour room. My brother and sister were there. Your father was busying himself hanging impressionist reproductions on the wall. Lots of friends and family were walking in and out. I started to feel terrible. You kept tugging at my body and I started vomiting. The whole world was reeling forward and backward. I remember the beautiful control I had over pains throughout your brother's birth. Somehow this did not make sense. I kept thinking, why the hell does *she* have to hurt me so much? Not resentful, just plain mad. How can anyone forget that kind of pain? And how can anyone wish to go through it another time? Ken, Peter and Helene were all trying to help. With the three of them by my side I started doing my exercises with the perseverance of a football pro. That breathing was the only thing that was going to save me from death. I clung to seconds, I gripped these numbers with my hands, throat and stomach and would not let go. I had Robert's watch and the desperate faith one hangs on to when nothing else is left. Why were not you coming faster?

The hours stretched beyond the century mark. I kept vomiting and looking at Renoir's picnic did not help much. But I was not going to let go, I had six hands to hang on to, they were all counting with me and it sounded as if we were hauling stones over a mountain. I was not thinking about you anymore, but only of each wave. As each was becoming longer and faster and stronger I knew there had to be a point when one was forced to let go, a place where one cracked down. The world felt very cold. We all were in a windblown railway station, shivering and counting. And then there was the last desperate surge of waves. I gripped Ken's hand, Helene's hand, lay on my side and worked as hard as I could, not wasting any breath, counting to the end. I felt you rushing out quickly between my legs. I could not think of looking at you. I could not think of anything. The room was full of commotion and voices. But I was very quiet, very still. I remember now someone's voice. It is a boy. I felt astonished. I turned over and looked at you. You came in. I saw it in your eyes. You stood on the threshold of life, then walked in. The room was very warm. The whole planet Earth was. We all had finally met. There was a complicity between us. You sighed and decided to doze off nudged against me.