

Seven-Star (Apropos of Nothing.)

On a visit home I went to the woods with my parents, to walk the dog where we used to go foxtail hunting every year with the pony club. Most of those fences we cleared back in the day were gone by now, the ones still standing had been there since we built them ourselves. Does nobody go hunting anymore, everyone up at dawn when steam rises from the fields and the hindquarters of horses? Maybe they like dressage better these days, we figured, or show jumping?¹

¹ Before you get any posh ideas, it wasn't like that at all. No bloodthirsty beagles with their noses in a freshly scented trail. No sacrificial slaughter. The pony clubs we grew up in were a strictly middlebrow affair. Our dads, who's arms we had twisted until they bought us the animal we so desired would sometimes join the club and learn the noble art of horse riding in middle age. The big horses would go in front and the ponies would follow after, but we would all clear the same fences and swim the same ditches. For each pack there was a "fox" - a rider with a foxtail pinned to their red riding jackets. The hunt would end with a race, where the contestants would chase them round a field to try and pluck it from their shoulder. One time I thought I was going to win, when my pony suddenly ran off along the old railroad, back to the stables. I tried to get him back on track but he was strong in the neck and hard in the mouth. To turn him around I took the whip to the side of his head while throwing all my weight in the left rein but he just shot out his shoulder and galloped home fast as he could run. When he stopped dead outside the stable his right eye was running. It looked like tears streaming down his long face. I was mortified; not only had I hurt him - something I, despite all my rage, had never intended - also this kind of use of the whip was unacceptable. We all knew this. We once saw a girl exiting the show jumping arena, where she had been disqualified for whipping her pony after a refusal. Her dad who was waiting outside pulled her out of the saddle; while holding the reins of her pony with one hand he proceeded to give her a spanking with her own whip, in front of the crowd. To see how she liked that? She was eleven years old.

That was something we talked about for some time, but her dad was a

Apropos of nothing, my mom declared: this is where she wanted to be buried! Right here, at this spot where seven trails came together in a star shaped junction. I asked her, did she still want an eco burial, with an acorn nestled in the folds of her earthly remains, inside a biodegradable cardboard casket, like we had talked about that other time? She answered that would be nice, but if we

little different: a self made man who had made a small fortune with custom kitchens and built the family's ranch style bungalow by himself. We all thought ranch style bungalows were super-tacky. There was something else though; at a party in the club cafeteria the parents of one of the other girls had a row, and her mom decided to walk home by herself to cool off. They didn't live far, but walking along the country road to their house she was killed in a hit and run accident. Another partygoer had left shortly after her and was suspected. He turned up at the carpenter's house in his stupor and was given exile overnight, before turning himself into the police the next morning. By then it was too late to take a blood test and charge him with driving under the influence. This was the kind of stuff people would know about each other growing up in a small community, but if you feel sorry for us, think again.

There is something about growing up in the sticks. To learn to dance in discos where nobody famous would ever be seen, where nobody gets their fifteen minutes of *that*, and where the only reason you would know the DJ is because you went to school together. A provincial hedonism, that is all about showing up and getting lost. Getting lost and getting fucked, because that's what you want to be, but not completely, just enough that you will show up next weekend and do it again. To moonshine in the moonshine and to bike home swaddled in darkness or eating after-party hotdogs and watch the sunrise in quiet streets where no one and I mean no one is up yet except you and you think to yourself I gotta get out of this place and you know someday you will you also know that even if you can take that girl out of this place you cannot take that place out of this girl.

couldn't get permission to do that, she would be just fine with us scattering her ashes. She hoped maybe we would come back some time, to this place where we had such good memories.

I then asked my dad what he wanted us to do with him after he died, and he said he just wanted to sit on the mantelpiece in his urn and wait for my mom to get ready. But what if mom goes first? In that case he would like for her to sit on the mantelpiece and wait for him. He wished for their ashes to be mixed before scattered. I asked my mom would she be okay with that, and she said yes, that would be okay. So now we have a plan. Not that I like to think of my parents as old in that way, but you never know.

I picked up a stone that was just lying there. Wherever I go I put stones in my pockets. Virginia Woolf waded out into a river. Tove Ditlevsen buried herself in a pile of leaves. Not to sound so morbid, but I do envy their keen sense of connection to place and time.

One Midsummer's Eve we built a bonfire out in the meadow where the ponies were grazing. Everyone was there and we sang that song about witches and trolls and the land that

we loved. That longest evening was teeming with life: grass and brambles, birds, bees, and insects all around, cars zooming by on the country road nearby. I mounted my steed, barebacked, to sit for a while and enjoy the summer breeze and his flanks against my thighs. All of a sudden the flock started horsing around, because they could, galloping faster and faster, with me in the middle of the stampede. I couldn't jump off, lest I would be trampled, so I clung to his mane and tightened my grip to stay straddled until they had raced out; when they came to a standstill I let myself slide down his side and casually walked back to the others who had watched from afar. Weren't you afraid? Asked some adult, but I said no, of course not, legs trembling in my satin short shorts. We girls would hide grasshoppers under our blouse to feel closer to nature and get startled when they suddenly jumped from their warm nests, long after we forgot where we put them.

Sitting in the sunroom, which was annexed to my childhood home since my childhood, I read in the paper that in the three decades since those lazy hazy days of summer the number of flying insects in Europe have plummeted by 75%. I relay this news to my mom. Yes, she says, it's because of that stain they use to protect the seed against mold and

fungus and stuff. The chemicals make the bees confused, she says; they can't find their way home, so they get lost and die. Whole swarms get lost like that and then they freeze to death. Oh, I said, I thought it was Monsanto and their Roundup that killed them? Well, it's that too, she said. I suggest my parents become beekeepers in their old age, they have a little plot of woodland out back, where they could put a couple of hives? But my mom is not feeling it; she gathered from the beekeeper up the road that it's quite a bit of work, and it occurs to me that we have reached an age where we cannot rely on our parents to fix everything for us any more.

Nowadays, when bees are few, revery alone will have to do.

Did you know that we owe the fact that we can revere Emily Dickinson's Poetry today, to her sister Lavinia? Emily herself wished for her papers to be destroyed after her death, and made her sister swear to do so. But when Lavinia — who never married and remained at the Dickinson homestead all her life — discovered the forty-odd manuscripts, she decided to publish. All of this I learned from the five-paragraph Wikipedia entry for Lavinia Norcross Dickinson — a lifetime in haiku. Omissions speak volumes. Behind every

great poet is a great editor, and after your death you are up for grabs. Six years after Emily's death, and two years after their initial publication, Dickinson's *Poems* were in their 11th edition.

Just to live a lifetime

In the space of a lifetime

That is the hardest thing to do

*There'll be nothing after you.*²

That is not Dickinson, not even close, just a little ditty from Moloko, but the way it conflates heartbreak with oblivion is neat, I find; nothing after you. Nothing can stop you nothing can break you now. Nothing can hurt you nothing can bring you down. Nothing reveals what was obscured. Nothing is as it seems, nothing. Nothing is the same old, same old, nothing. Nothing is nothing special. I want nothing. I know nothing. It's not nothing. Nothing in real life is larger than life; everything is a little smaller than you imagined it, than you remembered it.

Henrik Nordbrandt once wrote:

² Moloko "Blow X Blow" *Statues* (Echo: 2003).

*If I could say just one thing that is true
I would find myself some quiet water
A little lake with water lilies and bulrushes
Now I ramble restlessly from land to land*

(translation mine, from memory)

Shortly after I emigrated for the first time, when I had just broken up (again) with my then boyfriend, I called my mom. When she asked me if I was alright I recited that poem. Then I started to cry. She asked me again, was I alright?

Yes, I said, I'm alright. It's nothing. I just don't know what I want. Oh to be a teddy bear in the arms of a young boy, oh to be an apple suckling on a branch. Oh to be a woolly scarf, lost and hidden under a car, burgundy and gold like autumn leaves. Oh to be your tampon, wrote The Prince of Wales. A young lover or a quince pear hidden in the damp grass. Collette wrote of both in the same breath, so why not?

What *do* women want?

Me, I want nothing less than to be buried with two horses.

All that long hair in the grave. Two horses and my own

poetry. Nobody will miss it. No exhumation for me.³

³ Consider the curious case of Elizabeth Siddal, muse to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and immortalized in perhaps the most famous painting to be produced by the movement, Sir John Everett Millet's *Ophelia*. Although the painstakingly naturalistic background had been painted in advance during the summer of 1851 on the banks of the river Ewell in Surrey, the figure – for which Siddal posed in an antique dress and submerged in a bathtub heated by candles placed underneath – took nearly four months to complete over the course of the London winter of 1851-52. She survived the ordeal with a case of pneumonia; the result, according to connoisseurs, is the best likeness of Siddal ever painted.

Perhaps this painting was what inspired fellow Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti to obsessively court her? In *The Artist's studio*, poet Christina Rossetti describes a parasitic relation between muse and artist "he feeds upon her face by day and night" leaving to our imagination a twofold of vampire and original vamp. The couple started a tempestuous engagement lasting considerably longer than their two years of marriage, during which her husband's philandering and the birth of a stillborn daughter plunged Siddal into a state of depression and laudanum addiction, further exaggerating the pallor and demeanor so attractive to the London bohemia. Fox Maddox Brown writes about her in his diary "Saw Miss Siddal, looking thinner and more deathlike and more beautiful and more ragged than ever; a real artist, a woman without parallel for many a long year." When she died at the tender age of 32 (although the coroner noted the age as 29, perhaps in final nod to her beauty and vanity) from an overdose of laudanum, a bereft Rossetti hid his original poems in her luscious locks, that they'd be buried along with their object of desire. After seven years of bereavement – and also after marrying his new model Jane Morris – Rossetti ordered the exhumation of his deceased wife in order to retrieve the poems for publication. Perhaps he was convinced to do so by Charles Augustus Howell who also took upon himself the macabre task of carrying out the disinterring; in either case Howell is the only witness to Siddal's alleged mint condition when unearthed – miraculously untouched by decomposing the only testimony to the progress of time was the growth of her famous ginger hair which now entirely filled her coffin.

Death imitating life imitating death.

(Sources: Christopher Wood: *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Orion House, 1997) & Stephanie Graham Pina: *The Pre-raphaelite Sisterhood*

I read in the online edition of National Geographic about a Viking warrior who baffled scientists. This burial site in the south of Sweden, long regarded the gold standard in Viking entombment, including full body armor, a battle-axe, and two horses, belongs to a woman. Who knew? But the DNA doesn't lie. Except Vikings never existed, of course, they never knew themselves as such; Vikings were invented around the time of the rise of the nation state and of National Romanticism in Europe. They used to be tribes, now we had to be nations; we needed a shared identity, history, not histories, hence "Vikings." My kids laugh at me because I say Wiking Varrrior, but I know who I am. Still, I remember being disappointed when first I read the Icelandic sagas, because I had somehow imagined them to be more gynocentric, more egalitarian, or at least less biased, that they would pass the Bechdel test somehow, that women would have speaking parts, and not just be talking about men, because didn't they have the right to divorce and the keys to the house and all that? But it's basically Hollywood, sex and drunks and poetry and plundering and board games and

bloodlust and honor and eyes ripped out of sockets and so on and forth. But still, a female Viking Warrior, who knew?⁴

On my last night home my mom finally cooks me my favorite homecoming dish: roasted pig's hearts served in a cream sauce with chanterelle mushrooms foraged from the woods. My bosom friend came by for dinner. In the middle of the night I lay awake pondering the disturbing, yet delicious, yet disturbing, thought: I now have two hearts in my body. I eat so much pork when I am at home, and even when I try to go vegetarian there's always licorice, which is basically gelatin, skin and bones, and, what we were told when we were young: horse blood. This too will pass.

[...]

Way up in the cloud everybody is working. Typing away on their PCs in the airspace above the Atlantic. A turbulent existence for the life of the mind. On my way through the airport I grab a magazine with an Image of "Face of the Eighties" Renee Toft Simonsen and her photogenic daughter

⁴ Michael Greshko: "Famous Viking Warrior Was a Woman, DNA Reveals" *National Geographic* September 12 2017: <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/09/viking-warrior-woman-archaeology-spd/> (retrieved 21 December 2017).

on the cover. The caption reads: "We Still Sleep in Spoons." At that moment I know I want nothing more than this: to sleep in spoons with my daughter. It's been weeks.

All I ever wanted

All I ever needed is here in my arms

Words are very

Unnecessary

They can only do harm.⁵

(2017)

⁵ Depeche Mode: "Enjoy the Silence" *Violator* (Reprise: 1990)

