

Self Portrait With Hazel, Rose, Lillianne, Fern, Mildred, Bea

My mother named me
little old lady. Named me:
startle-easily, little-flincher,
night-terrors-with-spiders.
I lived in a different century.
I was born rural
in a city of mills.
My mother named me
place of unreachable hills.
A temperance movement of one,
I was sober
as spring water. I was old
then I was older.
My mother named me
may-your-body-never-
surprise-you-with-want.
I was her easy pregnancy, asleep
by eight, awake when convenient.
I held the fetal position
like a moral obligation:
her ribs were unmolested
as a Victorian birdcage. They pried
my soft bones like ancient pottery
from between my mother's hips
while she slept. An orphaned monkey,
a baby of the '70s,
I sucked the bright orange nipple
of a sterilized glass bottle, held
by some other woman
while my mother came-to. She named me
Hazel, Rose, Lillianne, Fern, Mildred, Bea;
names I wear like tarnished jewelry
pinned to the inside
of my bra for safekeeping.
They take turns speaking
through my mouth, choose
my handbags, prefer flat shoes.
They embody the word *habit*,
placing a napkin atop my glass
of water, one beneath to absorb the sweat,
carry a magnifying glass
to read menus. With them
I'm always the youngest in the room.
And nothing changes. They name me not-yet-

born, but predict a natural birth.

They ask:

do you believe us?

does it help you to believe in us?

Opal

We were in the yellow car, palest yellow
like lemon meringue pie, shiny yellow-shelled candy
jawbreaker. You said the car was called an *Opal*.
Dad parked it on the steep hill near the cellar door:
wait here I'll be right back. The cellar door,
low like the door to a cave or tomb,
dad had to duck his head to disappear. Cinder block cool,
the cellar had a kind of fragrant antique dust like books.
You waited with me. The car's front end pointed uphill,
so we were tipped back in our seats, off-kilter,
roller coaster-style. Would the emergency brake hold?
And that car (mid 1970s?)
did it even have an emergency brake? No
seatbelts. I felt the stillness give, an inch,
slow slide against resistance. I knew
when the car started to roll, gain speed
backwards, gravity would have me
pinned at the center, where the soul
and future ghost reside, to my vinyl seat—
my arms and legs thrown forward like a cartoon
character catching a cannon ball.
And I guess you couldn't stop it.
Or maybe you weren't sitting up front.
I guess I was alone.
At the bottom of the hill there was a lake.

More Than the Weight of its Laden Branches

The cottage has an apple tree and textbooks
in the attic, a couch slashed by bars of sun
where I lay tragic as a wine spill.
Because I fear discovery by the man
who mows the lawn, I keep my routine
simple: wake early with the birds,
wash in the stream, harvest water and apples.
Keep out of sight, conserve energy.
Three apples a day times twenty years equals...
When I stand too quickly the room goes
dim. In autumn I pick the tree
clean, store the apples in a pillowcase
for winter. I move like a ghost
behind faded curtains, ration my reading,
ration the apples, and make lists
in a black address book: embolism, sharp
cheddar, rhizome, cell division, linguini and clams.
I write: I know I will die of starvation
and should leave here. I stay.
I write: God is sending a husband
and wishes me to wait for Christmas.
Three apples a day times three months
equals...I wait. Christmas comes,
New Year's, clumps of hair in the bed.
I believe the remedy to be profuse
sunshine and love. I believe I will
die of starvation. Thirty days ago
I ate the last apple. It's cold
but the chickadees will sing me
(nobody-nobody-nobody) through winter.
I stop reading. I follow, on hands and knees,
the sun as it moves through the rooms,
lie down in its patches. The heater's breath
grows shallower every day.
I know I should leave but don't.
For one: I can no longer stand,
two: it's so peaceful here. I have everything
I ever wanted—an apple tree equals
more than the weight of its laden branches.
When my husband arrives we'll add
a garden and a smokehouse. My heart-
beat slows to an icicle's thin drip. I write:
whomever finds my body should know this was a case of domestic violence.

Not the Same Bird Twice

When I called for him outside, birds
mimicked his meow; not cat birds,
not even the same bird twice.
Near the drainage pipe,
when I thought I heard a sound like air
escaping from a tire, or in the woods, a far-off
plaintive call for help. But coyote and great-
horned owl don't kidnap cats for later.
Around here, by the time you realize
the cat's gone missing
it's probably in the last stages
of another animal's digestion.

When I called for him in the crawl space
I felt a century of domesticated ghosts
undrowse and rouse themselves, some
plastic sheeting rustled,
a long yawning silence stretched.
And above, the spring day heated up.
A cow licked the entire head of its calf. The neighbor
on chemo clutched her side— white as a thin
scrim of snow on the greening hill,
white as bleached bone with the grass
grown through, wild phlox; wild
as the soft purring of birds.