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Mother's Tongue

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Blanche Remembers

In 1933 in Chicago,  
they would see  
gangsters in classic limousines,  
the ones with rounded fenders.

Dillinger and his gang  
were shooting up the town.  
Her brothers played  
cops and robbers,  
or stickball;  
ran wild in the streets,

In the tiny apartment.  
she had no bed  
slept in a trunk.

She and her brothers  
got scarlet fever.  
Their mother was sick too,  
so the kids had to go  
to different hospitals.

She wrote to her brother,  
“My hospital has cute mice.  
What is yours like?”

He wrote her back,  
“Please don't send  
any more letters.  
You are a bad girl  
telling lies about mice.”

He never believed her.  
Even now,  
at eighty-six  
he thinks she was lying.

last first kiss

he was a violinist,  
told her  
he would pay  
for voice lessons.  
she described him as  
older (27) and going bald.  
she was seventeen  
when this rich man  
asked her to marry him,  
she said no,  
she had already been kissed  
by my father,  
who had no money,  
but at eighteen  
had long lashes,  
blue eyes—  
and silky blond hair.

## Mother's Tongue

Her silk voice sang Brahms Lullaby,  
rocked her babies,  
cradled us so long ago,  
protected us like the half-moons  
of wooden rocker feet.

Her sharp voice  
stopped tiny hands  
from irons, fire, filth.  
Warned us away  
from traffic and strange men.

Her scream  
clashed with my young voice,  
accompanied,  
the one time I swore at her,  
by a slap in the face.

I could never out-sing her,  
she was too strong.

Lately, her voice quavers with age.  
We squabble over time.  
She wants mine,  
my grown daughters'.  
But their voices are strong.  
I haven't the power  
over them she has over me

## The Broken Doll

They even sold her dolls.  
Nothing left but to flee  
Philadelphia for Chicago  
a chance for her father to work,  
a chance to start again.

She and her brothers ran free  
all that summer, snuck into movies,  
played cops and robbers,  
while, a block away,  
Dillinger's gang shot one another down.

Just one dolly, Blanche pleaded,  
pennies were saved, months passed.  
Oh, a beautiful doll, with lashes,  
a pink dress and long blond curls!

It was too much for five-year-old Sol.  
He was the baby, wanted the attention,  
took the doll from top shelf of the closet,  
and ripped her to shreds.

At sixteen, Sol worked Atlantic City's  
Million Dollar Pier, won ten dolls,  
and gave them to his sister,  
who accepted them grudgingly.

When I asked Blanche, now 84,  
"did that make up for what he did?"  
she said, "Not really."

## Mom at Sixteen

Smooth flesh not yet kissed,  
Dark curls not yet gray,  
Cracks in sienna photograph.

Lipstick deeply red,  
intense slate eyes,  
same as your granddaughter's.

Before you worked at Woolworth's  
instead of going to college,  
before you married Dad.

Your smile is sly, sexy, tough.  
Still a girl, there's fight in you!  
Before you gave up singing:  
your woman's sacrifice.

Before the divorce,  
the sixties, feminism, Vietnam.  
Not yet cursed with diabetes, children.

Before you helped us, time after time.  
Always open-handed, hearted, strong –  
also vain.

You are wearing a white dress  
(perhaps it is pink) with puffed sleeves.  
You stare straight ahead, unafraid,  
at your future.