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11.26.2023

Davis Street Drawing Room

TWO ANNES

I. Anne Wilson

Another season of transitions. Chicago, summer. As my husband settled into our new life across the Atlantic, I worked for a fiber artist, sorting through her collection of textile remnants. Each morning I biked to Davis Street in a northern suburb of the city, thinking I belong here and this is temporary. The artist's studio was calm and well-lit. A table by the tree-level windows held layers of frayed handkerchiefs—an archaeology of unraveling. We prepared surfaces for her exhibit opening that September. The object of study: cloth, but time's the true subject. I would move back to France before the leaves turned.

For some weeks my work revolved around edges. I looked through bins of old linens for interesting trims—openwork, embroidery—and set them aside to roll on tubes. It's how conservators store textiles. Folding creases cloth, and fibers keep memories. So, rolls. I thought of the table slowly filling with rolled cloths as a library of scrolls. They seem one to me now: close reading, conservation. Attentiveness, slow inspection. The work of stabilizing losses.

In the beginning of a summer twenty-eight years earlier, my mother left Chicago with her three toddlers and (lore has it) two suitcases. She moved her three children and two suitcases into her parents' pale brick house in northern France. She found work teaching history and French at a lycée technique. I didn't know about this chapter in her life until I was a teenager. There are different versions of what happened, but they both begin with my father's ongoing job search stretching the family's finances thin. Though my grandparents never used the word separation, their attitude has implied it. Over the years, their relationship with my father has soured to radio silence. I believe my father's version because one of her friends, the one she was closest with in the latter years of her life, has corroborated it. Your mother loved your father and was doing everything she could to get her family back together, she's said. He was to join you that Christmas. Perhaps he might look for a job in France, they thought.

That summer, my husband's and my situation was a perfect inverse to theirs: he moved to northern France first while I stayed in Chicago, and we both had work. I didn't particularly want to leave. I liked this job, the mix of research and meticulous manual work. I liked spending time with Anne, surrounded by her collection of linen, damask napkins, and lace fragments. Such small, unknowable histories. Those exquisite states of ruin. What is twenty-eight years, to them?

Fibers deteriorate but not at the rate of the human body. Tucked into a drawer, away from clothes moths, time stays suspended in them. But the ruin can run quick. Take my mother's loden coat, pristine when I inherited it. A few winters of hard, careless wear and now the rich, forest green wool is threadbare. When I hold it up to a lamp, I see patches of light. If I had kept it conserved in a cool, dark place, the coat would be just as it was when she wore it, flattening the time between her end and my present. In fiber time, my mother has just packed her suitcases and boarded the plane.

In fiber time, the flight's lifting and landing are two strands of the same thread, and I am tracing the same path a few weft lines later. There is a hole in the cloth, a sudden tear, from when my father received a call in the middle of the night on Thanksgiving and it was his turn to fly from Chicago to France, earlier than planned, not for the holidays, for her funeral. His turn to tell my brothers and me that she's gone and won't come back. I can't look away from it, the hole rent by his howl in the middle of the night.

Three decades from now, what will remain of the summer with Anne? The route I biked has already slid into oblivion. I can't recall exactly how I prepared the cloths for rolling, nor how I executed the folded sculpture. Perhaps I will remember the space itself, those windows with their sharp light, how—on certain rare days with a breeze—it felt like the room was an extension of the trees.

Perhaps nothing will remain but one bright particular. Early in the days of cloth-rolling, Anne calls me over. She has found a piece of cloth, something unusual. It is not, like most of her collection, quality linen, but an ordinary cotton. Not decorated around the edges with refined needlework, but crudely stitched in red thread across the surface. A woman holding a broom. Flowers—a trumpet vine—snaking around the bristles, her feet, and through the words *I woke and found that life was Duty*.

"What do you think of when you see this?" Anne says. "I mean the word duty, I'm curious what that evokes for someone of your generation."

It's possible I laugh, we both laugh. Anne knows I'm the wrong person to ask. So much of the Old World in me—all those childhood summers spent in that pale brick house in northern France, surrounded by ancient things, where my grandparents impressed the codes from another century upon me.

I don't respond with the obvious—I'm about to uproot again to join my husband. I love him, I want to be with him, but this time it has the weight of a duty: to follow.

What advice would my mother have given me? How had she experienced her moves from France to California to Buenos Aires, from Chicago to France? Did she see them as intertwined, love and obligation? They pull upon me like a riptide, all the questions I yearn to ask her.

Safer to examine the mystery of the cotton needlework. Anne and I wonder about where it came from, the woman who stitched, and for what. I'm taken by the wording, that sudden revelation—*I woke and found*—

A few days later, the context is clarified. When we uncover that the cloth's the second of a pair, the first showing a woman on a bed and that trumpet vine again—*I slept and dreamt that life was Beauty*—I feel a slight deflation.

II. Anne Balédent

Born Moulonguet in 1933, a practical woman and practicing Catholic often described as having *la foie du charbonnier*, the faith of a collier. Girlhood memories of fleeing the North when the bombing began, but not understanding. Full of tips for efficient housekeeping. At the clothesline, we give the sheets a good shake and pull them taut before folding. No need to iron, see? Detach and flip the collar on a worn dress shirt to make it new. Hide the cooking pans in the pantry so the guests (if they feel so obliged) can help clean up without getting their hands dirty. (You'll tackle the tough grease later, discreetly.)

She finds the word *enceinte* (pregnant) distasteful, prefers the euphemism, *attendre une heureuse évènement*, expecting a joyous event. Her English—though I rarely hear it—remarkable all these years after her brief *séjour* in England (how lonely she was, sent to live with the nuns!) before it was time for her to marry. She has kept her English up with Agatha Christie. Always a battered copy in the door pocket of her car, a dull yellow chosen because it's easy to spot in parking lots. Now, going blind, she cannot drive. Can no longer thread the needle of her sewing machine. Can read only the largest print with the right kind of light.

Has buried all but one of her seven brothers—eight if we count the baby who lived for only two weeks. (Why do we never count the baby?) She loves babies. Has held a brood of them in her arms, three generations' worth. Her and Grand-père's life's work has been to weave bonds between this sprawling family. A formidable effort, in the wake of loss and scandal. Of their five children, they've outlived two. I don't know whether my mother's accident shook her faith, but I recall the strain on her face in church the summer after my uncle's suicide, her eyes clenched, hands clasped, lips sewn shut.

Many times I've heard family members hold Grand-mère's style of belief as a counterpoint to Grand-père's. His: a constant questioning, involved in theological debates; hers: a kind of blind acceptance. I've always thought this comparison unfair, inaccurate. As if devotion comes easily to her, and how are we to know this? As if she has not felt despair. She doesn't like to voice what she finds unsightly. (Blind acceptance! Unsightly! I'm embarrassed by my use of figurative vision applied to her, whose eyes are failing.)

On this brisk, sunny November morning, the twenty-ninth anniversary of my mother's death, I knot one of her scarves around my neck—the one that has been with me the longest, the black silk adorned with guns and pheasants. My husband and I board a train to visit my grandparents. After lunch, we head to the cemetery. Grand-mère points

out the window to the footpath lining the Somme, which she and her brothers took every Sunday to visit the dead. “We didn’t have a car, so it was our outing for the day,” she says. “For me, the cemetery isn’t a sad place. C’est familial.” I feel the same way, have always loved these winding, tree-lined paths along vaults and lawn crypts, these ancient stones with their capes of ivy.

“Shall we take a shortcut?” She asks and tramps through the dirt and overgrowth, stopping to point out the cemetery’s oldest footstone, its letters eroded. “See the skull and crossed tibias?” I understand, without her telling me, that this is how she and her brothers would cut through the cemetery to the family plot, the one across the way from Jules Verne’s tomb. He’s immortalized in marble, surging from his grave with a shroud slipping off his back, reaching skyward. This image of the writer reverberated through my childhood. I wonder what effect the sculpture had on Grand-mère as a girl.

I don’t ask. We’ve just arrived at the family grave. She points to a name on the imposing headstone—her great-grandparent’s son, who lived for only thirteen months. “They had the plot built for the baby,” she tells me. There’s no more room in the family plot now, since her parents, two of her brothers and their wives, and my mother are buried there. Grave robbers have stripped away the iron chain; my grandparents have since replaced it. I remember the old chain, its languid way of swinging when we slipped under it to sweep the footstone.

Today, a damp mass of leaves and pine needles carpet the grave. I wish I’d thought to bring a broom. Why didn’t I bring a broom?

“It’s been twenty-nine years,” Grand-père says and looks at me incredulously. Grand- mère, as always, murmurs a Hail Mary.

That night, I pull out my mother’s loden coat and inspect the worn fabric. Tomorrow, I’ll stabilize the losses.