

CONSERVATORY: A LYRIC IN THREE VOICES

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ANNA: NOTHING HAPPENS

My parents clutch rings of keys and drive to work, my mother in hospital scrubs, my father in jeans and a belt, with his company's name on a patch over his shirt pocket. They come home with stories about walls and pliers and people who have been shot. But nothing happens *to* my parents, exactly; their jobs, my mother says, are about *catching the ball*, and they do it very well. Nothing happens, which means we're lucky. We eat meals at the same time every day. The television plays, the laundry dances behind the dryer's round window; my sisters leave the house with hockey sticks, and I draw pictures in my room. Once a year, for vacation, we drive somewhere you can read about in history books, and my mother reads from the AAA guide as my father swears at traffic. In fourth grade I learn to write in cursive and make two-point perspective drawings. I cross the invisible property line to the yard of Miss Carl, our neighbor. She teaches voice and piano at the university up the street, but says that she is not a professor. My parents like Miss Carl but not too much, calling her life *hothouse*, meaning, I think, that they don't like how often we go to the conservatory. And we do go to the glass-domed Victorian conservatory often, spending hours among the ancient ferns and palms.

Miss Carl is kind of messy. She doesn't mow her lawn a lot, and in her living room are piles of sheet music and old opera programs, half-dead flowers in vases that are forever being knocked over by cats, and stacks of books that don't make it back to the shelf. Nothing seems to happen there, either, yet it does: you can feel it — earthworms eating her yard's dirt, the bees' industry, the roots of her trees knowing how to go around objects before they reach them. The clock chimes; the arm of the phonograph drops on vinyl records; the voices of Maria Callas and Renata Tebaldi and Luciano Pavarotti begin as if they have been waiting to tell us something. Miss Carl says that at those moments, it is always now and not now, it might also be 1955 or 1981 or the moment Mozart put down his quill to listen to a wagon pass his window. Miss Carl has more

than one broken metronome, and an old piano, which I play even though I only know “Chopsticks” and “Heart and Soul” and a couple of themes from horror movies I’ve never seen. In a dusty big glass box at the head of Miss Carl’s stairs is a mannequin wearing a peasant girl’s outfit, and when I ask Miss Carl about it, she says that someone had once worn the costume in a production of *Carmen* but does not say more. I ask her whether the dummy in the dress is scary at night and she says no, the dummy is only a little pathetic. Miss Carl says she cannot play piano, but her hands sweep across the keyboard, Debussy and Beethoven and songs that I had thought were parts of cartoons but Miss Carl says are really arias. Then I go home to where everything is exactly as I left it, which makes me feel disappointed but safe.

MISS CARL: FERN FEVER

If Anna were to ask me why the Fern Room is my favorite one in the conservatory, I would comment first on the ferns’ green fingers, their Victorian laciness. I would tell her ferns were among the favorite snacks of dinosaurs, that fern-life is among the oldest kinds of life still here among us. That ferns are too ancient to know how to flower. That is all true. But I also think of the Victorians and their fern-fever, *pteridomania* they called it, a sickness that lasted generations. They embossed ferns on everything a woman of means might desire: glass, linen, china, stationery. They stole rare plants from each other and were arrested for it; they ventured into the woods on co-ed fern party overnights, unmarried couples in their old-style clothes bedding down in the cool, damp dark.

And then the terrarium, the Wardian case, tiny glass house that it is, created to house the ferns in real houses — a dollhouse version of the glass house Anna and I walk through here — created by accident when a botanist found a fern spore growing in a bottle in which he had sealed a cocoon.

Fern-fever: none of us has a reason we love the things we do. I once spent three miserable, silent years in love with my best friend; all my life, I have held my anger in my fist. I have been gripped by obsessions. I have housed feelings — protected, watered, displayed them under glass — when I knew they did not make sense. The

conservatory — its snow-globe feel, the ferns that fed the dinosaurs — none of what it houses belongs to us. It's the pretending part, the collecting and the sealing off, that feels so good. Being here feels outside of the passage of time, almost like childhood. As an adult, I also think it is a house that wants to break.

THE FERNS: WHEN THE TREES WEPT

Among our early memories are the thousands of years that resin overflowed from the conifers, gold and sticky. It pearly on the needles of the fir trees and puddled the forest floor. Everywhere was a smell that you might call *Christmas* and we would call *then*. Then, before the resin hardened into amber, trapping the missteps of prehistoric flies; then, before the glaciers and rivers carried it from the forests to what would become a great sea; then, before the Baltic Sea heaved enormous red glassy chunks of amber onto its beaches. It would be millions of years before humans gathered the amber and cut and polished it, and carried it in skin pouches across land bridges, offering it in trade. Years before anyone insisted the ant, the air bubble, the mosquito, the silk of the spider's web trapped inside made the hardened amber additionally exquisite. The trees wept until they stopped, and none of us ferns ever knew why. We did not interfere.

MISS CARL: THE SEAM

You are waiting for me to *tell you something*, and I am from the last generation to believe that one does not *talk about it*. What would either of us gain, if I were to tell you of the life I led before I lived next door to Anna, or all the things I wanted but lost or never got? Perhaps mine is the last generation to eat its fear and sadness. In my childhood, adults were both more shrunken and magnificent for what we knew that we would never see. I miss this in the way I miss seeing men wear hats to work. Can we go back to the ferns now?

In the warm wet world before history, there were great stretches of ferns and swamps. Over time, the plants broke down and compressed to become peat. The peat was pressed deeper and deeper into the earth, as if between the pages of a very heavy book. The peat turned into coal. The coal, at times, turned into diamonds. Nothing stays as it is.

If you've ever seen a peat fire, you know its slow, low burn. You know its smell of smoke and earth, like the taste of a good single-malt. A vein of coal in the earth is called a *seam*. It stitches together past and present, the elements of earth and fire. Thousands of fires rage underground along the coal seam, even now. Whatever starts them does so without help, and the fires are impossible to fight.

The railroads fed fern-fever. The trains helped collectors travel to fern-filled pockets of England that once would have been out of reach. Imagine it: the great iron locomotive's furnace loaded with coal, loaded up with gentlemen and fine ladies with their parasols, chasing ferns: a snake eating its tail, the heart hurrying after itself.

ANNA: LIVING FOSSILS

The fern is a living fossil, Miss Carl says, a very old kind of plant that hasn't changed over time, one with an ancient heart. What I picture is my cousin's house in Lawrence, Kansas. It is made of limestone. He and I lie in the grass under the kitchen window, listening to the clank of our parents' silverware, rubbing our fingers over the fossils in the house's foundation. You don't have to look hard to find them. There's lots of limestone and fossils in Kansas; at the university up the hill, all the buildings are made of limestone. Kansas was once a sea, and the fossils are sea animals. There's dinosaur bones in western Kansas, and probably ferns. Kansas is hot and steamy in the summer when we visit. The sky, out the windows, is blue and unblinking, and when you go out under it, you see giant cracks in the earth. My mother hates it; it is, she says, like standing in front of an open oven door. Probably Kansas remembers being a sea. Kansas is an ancient heart.

MISS CARL: YOU CANNOT USE THE HUMAN VOICE TO BREAK GLASS

You cannot use the human voice to break glass. I know because I have tried. With my college friends, after wine, when we were young and studying voice, though we knew we weren't even supposed to be drinking. What went down our throats was supposed to be tepid water and salt gargle, nothing harsh at all. Yet, here we were, in love with *bigness*, voices, stories, gestures, growing the size of our lungs for the distant purposes of velvet and fake daggers — why *wouldn't* we all be crowded in some kitchen, postrehearsal 10 p.m., pasta sauce lively on a stove, a guitar and heat and lots of laughter, and before you knew it someone would set an empty wineglass on the far side of the room. Wasn't that the first thing you learned about opera?

In the seventies there was a television commercial with Ella Fitzgerald, for cassette tapes. *Crystal-clear fidelity*, the announcer said. The camera focuses on a wineglass, and Ella Fitzgerald is singing in the next room — you can half-see her silhouette and microphone — and the glass shatters as she hits a long high note. The announcer asks, *Is it Ella? Or is it Memorex?* Ella adds, *I'll never tell.* You see the glass and you don't, mostly shine and outline, most visible in its breaking.

I walk the glass hothouse with Anna. Some days I am with her. Some days I am in my twenties again, in a flat in Florence, Paris, New York, wherever the chorus was then, back at the beginning, all of us interchangeable in our flounced gowns, prisoners or bridesmaids or cigarette girls or slaves. That time a five-, ten-year crescendo. We ate music.

THE FERNS: THE OUTDOORS

We have always lived in the conservatory. We miss fireflies. We miss the tang of iron in soil. The brilliance magnified by raindrops. Earthworms and rats. We miss the tangle of a spider's web. Pollen. Wind. The faint tug of the moon. North American crickets in the evening, at summer's close.

The stories that were brought to us by various rivers, different

depending on which was doing the telling: Mekong, Mississippi, Amazon, Thames. There were stories of sediment, stones, and fish. Boats. Stories of mountain chains, wearing down, and epics of weather. Something listens to the story of ferns.

We heard the trilobyte story for a very long time, and then that one stopped. It has been a long while since any river spoke of the giant lizards, except for bones. At the time we left, we had been hearing less and less of the giant striped cat, and the great ape in the lowlands of Africa. These stories never have a resonating close. Mostly they dwindle. Occasionally there's a crescendo in the form of a volcano or an asteroid, but mostly the stories just stop.

This conservatory is tedious. We do nothing here all day but look at our own reflections.

MISS CARL: SNOWFLAKES

In winter, the glass building of the conservatory becomes another ice palace, like the one at Saint Paul's winter carnival. Inside, I am both in the snow and separate as the wet ferns breathe. My favorite line in Anna's beloved *Snowflake Bentley* says the man who discovered no two snowflakes are alike, lived when farmers *cut the dark with lantern light*. As if they were my mother when I was small, folding lined notebook paper in such a way that we could cut it into snowflakes to tape on the fern-frosted front window. Her silver shears went *crunch sshh crunch* — the sound of boots breaking a path, the blue hour almost on us. White cut-out bits of paper on the table, the floor. Whatever talk we made . . . I don't trust my memory. We didn't take so many pictures then. Anna's book displays Bentley's photographs of snowflakes, but doesn't mention that he teared up each time he remembered a perfect crystal that evaporated before he captured it. That's the detail I never forget, that one and that scientists say that snowflakes, when they vanish without melting, *sublime*. My mother is not dead, but is no longer the woman who held those scissors. How ardently I loved her as our language piled up, then was swept away.

THE FERNS: ON THE EVOLUTION OF FLOWERS

The flowers showed up and called into question everything we thought we knew. For as long as any of us could remember, we were all the same, or seemed to be. We smelled of oxygen and green. We lived in the forest. We *were* the forest. But there they were, swanning around with the wind, silky and vivid in ways we only knew sky could be — egg-yolk yellows, the lavender of long twilights — and seeping fragrance.

We had no way to describe the scents except to use the names we had for each flower. You say rose, magnolia, violet; we said answers the spiraling voice of the sun, equinox midnight moon-cloud, late-summer says goodnight. Even we were intoxicated.

There is not one of anything, we'd said. Everything comes again and again. Rain, spores, and the wind to float them: all come in abundance from the sky. It still had to be true. But each flower by her very beauty and plushness suggested that no, perhaps there was only room for one; perhaps there was a competition here; perhaps some things were finite.

The insects were drawn to patterns on their petals we couldn't see, and did their dirty work, energetically, fetching pollen, hustling it here and there on their gold-dusted legs. As time went on, some of the flowers turned into cherries and pears — more blushing, sweet flesh — and along came the black bears and squirrels to spread their seeds. And some of us started to want in ways we hadn't known to, and others who didn't want grew anxious, and still more of us were irritated and wanted the forest to be as it was before. Around us rose an anxious hum.

MISS CARL: THE DROP OF HONEY

Once, when I was a voice student, my tongue wandered my mouth disobediently, strangling my high notes. Then my voice teacher put a drop of honey on the center of my tongue, and it forced my tongue to lie flat. The honey's flowery smell filled my mouth as I tried not to choke (but I wouldn't really choke), singing the only scales one can sing with a drop of honey on one's tongue,

those with the sound of *ah*-.

A drop of honey, maybe one-twelfth of a teaspoon, is all the honey a worker bee makes in her life. It is the distillation of her accomplishment. A lifetime's worth of accomplishment lies within each half-hour singing practice. It is hard to teach a person to sing, because her instrument is her insides. No one can control what her insides are like. No one can trade in her vocal cords or sinus cavities for others whose sound she prefers. The inside of a body is also the only instrument that no one can see. A teacher can guess at a lot — I watch how a singer holds her mouth, or tenses her throat — but voice teachers are forever making up metaphors to help people sing in certain ways. *Sing into the mask* is a common one, and it means, Sing into your facial bones. Or even, *Try floating your voice like a feather until it rests on the top of your soft palate*, which I admit is kind of odd, so I only said it once. The point is to make the singer do something different. If it works, a singer learns how it feels in her own body to make a specific sound. Sometimes I have a student pinch the tip of her tongue between her fingers as she sings. Sometimes I put a drop of honey on a student's tongue.

Honey is the only food people eat that is made by insects. Honey is the purest concentration of labor. A drop of honey is time compressed — a field of flowers, a season, one worker's life. Behind the doors of the practice rooms at my college, *ah-ah-ah-ah*, the voices go up and down the scales, each accompanied by one hand on a piano.

ANNA: NAMES

Bees are suckers for divas, Miss Carl says; they like their flowers brightly colored, fragrant, and shallow. In her unruly garden, she plants flowers that the bees like, zinnias, poppies, and bee balm. I am not afraid of bees. Miss Carl's flowers also brought me to Miss Carl's yard. But I came back for Miss Carl, who listens and never yells, and knows the names for things. Now I can point and say lavender, hyssop, coneflowers. Miss Carl has six different kinds of mint, including one that smells like chocolate. There's one the neighbors' cats like to chew on, and you can always find one of them lying in a patch of sun nearby, Freddy or Schizo or Oreo. Miss Carl keeps the mint in broad and shallow pots because, she says,

they're criminals who wander and strangle everything. Flowers are not made for people, but bees, she says; when it comes to flowers we just got lucky.

I like names. When I learn them, a new part of the world reveals itself. The world is a page in a giant coloring book and every time I learn a word or name or fact I color in a tiny new section or the fact lets me press a little harder on my crayon. I want the whole page colored in before I am old. I try to pay attention all day. I play a game: every day, walking down the street, I try to see one more detail I didn't notice the day before. When I can't fall asleep at night, which is every night, I try to remember the day in perfect detail. Every word of the musical we sang last year in third grade. On the shelf above the piano the glass fish Miss Carl brought me from Murano is next to a crystal basket my parents were given at their wedding, which is next to . . . what? *Murano* is a beautiful name, and it's an island near Venice where people make glass. Zinnias, poppies, bee balm, the-bowl-of-catmint, lavender. The twelve times tables, because the way the numbers shuffle through the list is beautiful. I am good at paying attention. I want to be better at remembering than anyone has ever been.

MISS CARL: QUEEN BEES

A beekeeper friend pulled out a section of hive to show me a queen. She was surrounded by workers incessantly stroking her with their glossy legs. Even then she could not stop moving from one cell to the next, popping out eggs. She did not seem annoyed or flattered as much as she seemed busy. It's supposed to be lonelier to be the lead in a traveling opera company. The chorus is together, sometimes even in one big dressing room. The lead practices on her own. When the lead joined us, though, we all deferred to her. Hers is the voice that becomes recognizable, and indeed some of what gets someone cast in a lead role is that her voice is singular. Of all the bees, the queen is the only one who makes something that lives past her. The workers pass on their needed labor. Yet who among us tries a drop of honey and says in wonder, *O Worker #6531!* A certain amount of spiritual work goes into being a star. A star's vision must be clear. She must be ready to lay all those eggs. It's not that a worker bee, or a chorus singer, doesn't also have talent — it's talent,

not weakness, to defer to an ego, and be pliable, to successfully react without explicit instructions. In a chorus, one should not stand out too much. Not with voice or look-at-me charisma and clothes. Queen bees are physically bigger, are velvet-cloaked with gossamer wings. They wear jet beads, black lace fans, black satin gloves. Then there are those of us who are not sure which we are or should be. Queens are sure of the world's adulation, and the world can sense ambivalence, in the same way that bees know when you're afraid.

THE FERNS: BLACK BEARS

Most animals do not eat ferns. White-tailed deer do. So do rabbits. Black bears eat fiddleheads with acorns, blueberries, whatever humans toss out, gorging themselves for November, when they will find a cave and sleep through the winter. In midwinter, in the cave, the female gives birth to cubs. The bear is big and elusive to some, but we see him often. You call the unknown far north the *Arctic*, which means *bearish*. We find this strangely inaccurate. There is a set of stars that numerous ancient tribes of people, none of which knew of each other, all named Big Bear. We take this to mean there is some truth to this name. The Big Bear climbs highest in spring and lies lowest in fall. During that time, the tribes agree, the bear is lying down for a long sleep, by which the tribes really meant the earth was settling down for winter. The bear is lying down for a long sleep. The earth will lie down for a long sleep, and give birth again when no one can see. The bears make scratches on the trees as a way to talk with one another. Once the bears are gone from the earth no one else will be able to read them.

ANNA: PEPPERIDGE FARM

When my mother called me to tell me that Miss Carl had died, the first thing I thought of was how I didn't like to visit Miss Carl when my mother was with me. At those times, Miss Carl would cease to be mine and become any adult, while I dissolved from being myself into only being a child who looked at her knees as

the grown-ups talked. A child who wandered through Miss Carl's living room to stare at the black-and-white photographs of opera singers in fluffy dresses.

Then I remembered an afternoon I had forgotten: the visit had been sweaty and tedious, and just as I thought I would finally be released, Miss Carl brought out a Pepperidge Farm coconut cake, still in its cellophane-wrapped box. The cake had been thawing without my knowing it as the women talked, in a gray-and-white box, with a miniature snow-covered farm and wagon that look drawn on by a delicate hand in pencil. And though I had never walked around a bend and had the hills unwrap for me a rotting barn, these big-spoked wheels, I had seen enough pictures to know I should believe in them, and I did. Condensation had fogged the cellophane like breath on a window's icy glass, but the plastic kept the winter scene safe, kept each white layer snowy with coconut flake.

MISS CARL: QUEEN BEES (REPRISE)

In the garden, I look at the bees and think, Pity the worker bee. One more good-hearted woman working herself to death for the comfort of everyone else. At least workers have the power to sting, and occasionally they'll do it. At least workers get to go outside and visit flowers; at least they dance.

You hear that phrase *queen bee*, as if it's desirable, to be queen. A queen is only valuable for her eggs. Even as she's fed and pampered by her workers, she never stops. Eggs in the thousands, packed into honeycomb as fast as one every forty-five seconds. One day soon, one of these cells will produce another queen — she doesn't control that, only those same workers who also defer to her do that, they choose a cell to feed royal jelly, though she doesn't know which or when — and that queen will emerge from its cell to fight her, until one of them, maybe her, is kicked out of her own hive.

Both lives are different kinds of personal tragedies. There are an infinite number of workers, and only one queen. To be a worker is to be anonymous and safe; to be a queen is special, but it also means forever watching the cells, aging and waiting for the queen who will inevitably arrive to replace her.

MISS CARL: MANY THINGS WERE LARGER

When night falls, the last person — I imagine a janitor — sets an alarm and turns his key in the conservatory's glass door. From inside, the sound of his footsteps until they fade away. The ferns are ferns all night as the misters turn on and off, and the temperature stays 72 degrees, humidity 60 percent. The moon clicks on. It is hard for me to fathom the ferns' world without a human stamp on it; hard to imagine the ancient dragonfly and its two-foot wingspan without someone to comment on whirl and soap-bubble iridescence. See, even that — soap bubbles, children pursing their lips and blowing breath, the glycerin skin that coats the bubble wand. Before we came, many things were larger. Terrible lizards, larger turtles, eight-foot centipedes, thirty-foot snakes. Not one of us was there to watch the dragonfly skitter over water the way I did on summer afternoons in my childhood, sitting on a dock by the creek, darting blue needles all precision and steel. No one to write it a song, sketch its wings, cast it into silver filigree, or try to describe precisely the way it hovers over the Queen Anne's lace. The mammals we eventually became were small, hunting mostly at night. Even the moon was bigger, but I do not wish to overstate this. Then language made everything shrink.

THE LAST DAY

There was a last time Anna and Miss Carl went to the conservatory, but neither of them could have told you when it was. In books there is often a symbolic and important last meeting. In this case, Miss Carl only realized at some point that, whenever she saw Anna anymore, it was with a girl her own age, and two of them were riding away on their bikes. If Anna saw Miss Carl, she half-waved politely, but most of what Miss Carl saw of Anna was her back. There was no more coming over to talk like a son of a gun.

The plants went on living their green lives, of course. Time moves more slowly for them, and under glass it moves so slowly it doesn't seem to move at all. If the plants ever knew about Miss Carl or Anna, they did not care. They know that everything hap-

pens again and again, and another Anna would soon reappear if she had not already, and that there are an infinite number of Miss Carls. Plants do not fall for the idea we do, that there is only *one* of anything. To a fern, the world has always been a rain of spores and themselves arriving, over and over again. If this was not happening against the backdrop of the damp forest, then it was happening in the world under glass, where even seasons are separate, and everything is contained and freezes and is a little more like the world of what humans believe memory to be.