

Selection from

***The Blue Dress* by Alison Townsend**

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Founded in 1996 by Robert Alexander, the Marie Alexander Poetry Series is dedicated to promoting the appreciation, enjoyment, and understanding of American prose poetry. An imprint of White Pine Press since 2001, the Series publishes one to two books annually. It is our mission to publish the very best contemporary prose poetry and to carry the rich tradition of this hybrid form on into the 21st century.

Fever of Unknown Origin, 1955

At age two I nearly died, a fever of unknown origin sweeping me on dark swells while you floated, constant at my side. For six weeks you hovered, a blurred figure in a white gown with blue flowers, who leaned into my crib, crooning old songs I have never forgotten and praying, willing me into life again.

There was the touch of your hand on my cheek when they changed the I.V. in my ankle. And there was the knowledge that you slept beside me at night, a tall, blonde woman curled uncomfortably into the small cot at my side. Once I saw you leaning toward the window at twilight, staring into a sky starred gold by city lights. I thought I was dreaming, but you turned slowly, weeping, and somehow I realized, *She will be sad if I leave her. I must get better. I must come back from wherever I am.*

Years later, in the middle of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, outdoors at the Hollywood Bowl, that same night sky opens above me and I hear you calling across time, across distance. *Come back, little girl*, you say. *Come back, my darling. Don't die. Please come back.* The wind lifts my hair, though the trees are not moving. In my adult life, sitting beside a man I love, I am three thousand miles from the place I last saw you, a woman walking out an arched door toward her own death in winter, white flakes swirling like an omen in her face.

It's summer, and I am far away. But your clear voice stretches like a rope from the land of the dead into the land of the living. It brings me back to the world, the way you brought me back as a sick child, the way you remind me to come back when I'm most tempted to give up and enter the kingdom of darkness. To come back because you are with me, though I'm no longer your little girl but a woman grown beyond you. To come back because you love me, because even half a lifetime later and one death between us, that is what remains.

A Child's Book of Death

I don't know who watched over your body, Mother, after you'd left it, or how my father got you from Cleveland to Dobbs Ferry. I only know that you arrived, motionless and as chill to the touch as the flesh of certain poisonous mushrooms. I was afraid of you then—though it seemed disloyal—and thought maybe I'd killed you, praying for you to die when you did not return as you'd promised.

Night after night, kneeling beside the spool bed, my pink flannel nightie with lambs tucked around my ankles, the floor breathing snaky drafts, the sisal carpet pricking my knees, I begged the great and implacable dark to make you better and bring you home, offering up Babar or Barbie the way I'd offered Raggedy Ann, on whom I operated, slitting her kapok-filled chest with nail scissors and digging my fingers in deep for her heart.

Which was supposed to be real, the way you were but then were not, as you lay before us, your body stuffed with darkness I smelled but couldn't see, the distance you'd travelled as enormous as all the states that slept between us while you lay dying in your high, white hospital bed, and Jenny and Steve and I prayed for you—*Our Father who art in heaven Now I lay me down to sleep*—every prayer we knew, our words a useless gabble we wanted to be true, falling from the small, mint-scented churches of our mouths.

Seventeenth Summer

Long after we went to bed, my sister and I'd lie awake, listening to the sound of my father arguing with my stepmother about her affair with his friend in the pharmaceutical business. They spoke softly at first but got gradually louder, his voice rubbing back and forth against her voice like a stick dragged across wood until the whole thing began smoking and they went at it in earnest, their words magnified for us by the network of makeshift heating vents tunneled through our two-hundred year old house.

And though we got high nearly every night, played John Mayall's *Bluesbreakers* over and over, and sometimes slept with our heads under our pillows—the muffle of feathers pressed like hands across our mouths—nothing we did could shut out the sound of their voices or the way they struggled together, his questions slamming into her taunts into the tears we pushed down our throats, swallowing them as if those two had entered our bodies, forcing their sorrow and rage upon us

until we burned with them, turning straight into the flames the way panicked horses will, confusing fire with safety or love that consumes what it touches, bright lesson that will not go out, no matter how much water I carry or how often I douse my memories of that house—where we were girls together, Jenny, where we kept each other company in the dark, growing up somehow, getting out . . . though you tell me now you cannot remember anything about it.

Raising Water

Solid and red as a mechanical heart, the hand pump stood, a British soldier at attention. Sentry of the back steps. Guardian of all the secrets hidden in our Pennsylvania yard.

It fascinated me, that scarlet presence out of another century. Cool to the touch, warming in sunlight, its trough of silver gushed up and outward like a river from beneath the land.

Each spring when the rains came, the pump ran, its handle open, the force of deep currents moving on their own. One year it paused that way in a hard frost—motion and the memory of motion caught as a cascade of silver arching toward the frozen ground.

And summers I stood, minutes at a time, pumping as if everything depended on the spill of clear water. How my arms ached within their sockets. How the blisters stood out in little bubbles, fierce red spots burning in my palms.

I felt like an adult, but couldn't have said why. I loved the sound of water falling, and the way it glistened, a sheet of silver fabric draped across the steps. I loved the wetness. The pansies drinking. The strange salt taste of sweat upon my lip.

I didn't know I loved the work, the fear, the rhythm. The effort of all things dark and secret—pulled, with the sparkle of clear water, from deep beneath the ground. I knew only that I loved pumping, and that when I had pumped long enough and hard enough, the handle would move for a few strokes under its own power. I would bend then, my hands cupped into a small bowl beneath the shimmer. And lifting, I would drink and drink again.

I didn't know what I raised, a girl alone at a red pump, playing. But how often I think of it since, feeling again the ache in my shoulders. The creak of old metal pulling up secrets. And the cold, cold water, its message an urgent language, burning in my palms.