

CAROLINE EARLEYWINE

When I Think of Parenthood

I think of my grandfather in the ICU.
How when my father and I were visiting him

and about to leave, he begged my father to call him
when he made it home safely. How he'd cried the time

my father's phone had died as he was driving home,
called me in a panic, sure something had happened.

But ICU rooms have no phones. Just a window to a dark
sky. A curtain for privacy. Just the flashing lights of a silent

TV. The sound of my grandfather's labored breath through
the oxygen mask the doctors made him wear but he kept

taking off. So on the way out, we asked the nurse to wait
30 minutes, then to pretend we had called her, asked her

to go in and tell my 97-year-old grandfather
that his boy had made it home.

Bible Belt Gay

My neighbors were forbidden to watch
Disney because the company supported

“gay” people. It was the first time I ever heard
the word. It coiled inside me, rattled its fire
and brimstone. I didn’t understand it

exactly, but knew it was perverse. Fruit
from the tree not to be reached for.

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During a lunchtime debate, an oboe player
insisted the bible says gay people are going
to hell. “Well I don’t believe in the bible then!”

I hissed. A silence followed, everyone’s eyes wide
and on me. I took it back, felt my face flush

with shame. I understood—I had taken a step
too far from the garden. Looked down and saw
my naked flesh.

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I only had one boyfriend in high school
and I cringed every time he kissed

my cheek. When I arrived at the dance
on his arm, a girl who often teased me

said, “Good—we were all
starting to wonder about you.”

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A girl I played soccer with had a favorite saying:
“That’s so gay.” Years later, I watched a home video

and my jaw dropped when I heard the phrase come out
of my own mouth, the camcorder heavy on my shoulder

as I stood in front of a mirror, commenting on how bad
my hair looked in the reflection — “So gay, so gay.”

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My college professor told me about a lesbian student
interviewing for teaching positions. “I told her she needs

to make sure to look a certain way when she interviews,
or she won’t get the job.” I nodded, still closeted,
but seen.

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I hadn’t been to a church in years but decided to join
my sister. She assured me the church was progressive.

The preacher started in on Eve, on temptation,
on the importance of keeping marriage sacred —

between a man and a woman.
During the prayer, my sister looked

at me. The old shame tried to slither inside,
but I followed my own commandments by then.

Without a word, we stood up
and walked out before the preacher

could say *Amen*.

Ode to my Wife's Gender

My dearest theyby. You magician
with kitchen scissors, coming out

of the bathroom with the coolest cut.
Praise your tool-belt and the way

you wear it. Praise the evolution
of your pronouns and your closet,

dresses replaced with blazers,
button-ups, shiny black boots.

My heart bursts when you are bow-tied
and beaming in hot pink pants. Praise

your hands on a guitar or hammer or my
thigh. Praise the purple toy car

proudly displayed on our shelf—
the afterthought birthday present

from your dad after you'd opened
all the Barbies and bows, after you blew

out your five candles and wished yourself
a boy, like you did every year. Praise

your joy at being seen. Praise your tears
at the dog commercial, or the movie

Wall-E, or when you play "500 Miles"
on the guitar and sing it next to me.

Praise your crooked grin. The arch
of your eyebrow that punctuates

your speech in perfect rhythm when you're
telling me a story. Praise the way you cradle

our little dog and sway with him
in the kitchen, his tail wagging,

then pick up all 60 pounds
of our other dog and do the same.

Praise the way you dance—free,
shirt untucked, the last one

on the dance floor. Praise
how you grab my hand

to join you, the way you lead
and follow in equal measure.

Broken Ghazal

after Suzanne Langlois

Maybe needles are slivers of light kissing your body.
Maybe x-rays are portraits of outer space, the body

a galaxy—maybe the tumor is a Mona Lisa moon.
Maybe it's beautiful. Maybe cancer is a body

trying to live forever, cells in frantic creation—
a big bang. Maybe my aunt is somebody

not cremated, but confettied, a celebration. My uncle,
the guest who shows up six months late, after everybody

has gone home. Maybe my grandmother's urn is the bottom
half of an hourglass, years collected in a bronze body.

Maybe my grandfather's stomach wasn't filled with cancer,
but with stars, a whole night sky he swallowed when nobody

was looking. Maybe this sickness isn't in me, or my siblings
or parents, or if it is, it's not the slow-moving guillotine, body

as bomb, undetonated. Inevitable. Maybe it's just
lonely. Maybe it thinks of itself as a friend, somebody

who will walk up to me on the street one day and say
Caroline, it's me! It's so good to see you. Maybe bodies

are stars in a constellation, dead long before the light reaches
us. Maybe we look up and see them dots

we connect

of the same

broken

body.