

# Palimpsest

ANN SCOWCROFT

i. generation

Do you remember that day when bent  
before me on one knee you snapped  
shut the unforgiving plastic of my rain jacket  
and with amused indulgence recited:

*Oh what a tangled web we weave,  
When first we practise to*

deceive.

You had caught me lying, some inconsequential lie, perhaps  
Yes I ate the crusts  
No I never used your scissors  
Someone else got mud on my boots

I am five and anxious to be released into the wet  
green yard with my new umbrella, which is transparent and  
creaks when I open it, smells of all that is new and mine  
exclusively, through which I will watch the rain fall  
listen to the splot! plock! of each drop  
giddy in my bubble of vinyl vapour  
boots squelching shins splattered  
earthworms will rise in watery elevator  
and I will extract one slowly watch its accordion segments  
strain, wonder will it snap free from earth's grip,  
coil whole in the palm of my hand,  
or just snap then grow  
another head or tail?  
And will that happen right away?  
Will I see?

But I'm lying again.  
Did you notice the shift from past to present?  
The slide from present to future?  
If truth is found in the details,  
which details?  
Did you see the earthworm stretch? That never  
happened, yet I see it more clearly than my own childhood.

All I truly remember:  
your body on bent knee before me,  
your hands gathering me somehow to you,  
Shakespeare unaccountably in your mouth  
binding us to that moment in my memory forever

True or false: it is dangerous for a mother to address  
the origin of lying.

## ii. your memory

the great-uncle I know has left  
and this other one pulls me on his knee  
even his voice has changed  
urgent, low  
*just come here a minute*  
he is consumed by something I cannot fathom  
presses his trembling lips to mine  
then holds me still  
with one hand as the other explores my  
narrow chest then pulls the elastic on  
my underpants when  
I strain for release he whispers in my ear *stay here*  
I can tell he needs this but I am not stupid.  
I leave and watch what remains from the safety  
of the meticulous  
pressed-tin ceiling

iii. your brain

for example, your fingers are the source:  
reach for the damp forehead of your sleeping  
child then lift to bring his smell into you—  
your thalamus is the road, carrying this  
information to the amygdala, which rates it  
from one to ten then passes the moment to  
your hippocampus, the secretary, which files  
it next to the memory of that same child, soft  
and aware at six months  
loving you with a completeness you never even thought  
to imagine  
resting the impossible weight of his head on  
your shoulder caressing your face with one small  
hand as you bend to bring all of him back  
into you for the space of one breath one  
inhalation of the sweet spot at the base of his  
tender neck

this sensation, this secret, this miracle, Broca's area  
will translate, bring to your mouth as clay.  
From there, it is up to you.

iv. the wind

I stand next to him. He wears patched  
coveralls and a straw hat.

He is pointing at the walnut's leaves showing their grey-green  
undersides, rattling in the south-easterly wind.

*It's going to rain, he says. You can tell by the leaves.*

I am six.

I believe him.

Everything he says is true.

v. some things I forgot to tell you about the brain

if the amygdala is overwhelmed by an experience  
the hippocampus doesn't know how to file it;  
like any six-year-old can tell you in these situations  
you should just stuff it under the bed  
or behind the  
door. No one will ever know unless  
perhaps one  
day your lover whispers in your ear  
*just come here a minute*

vi. there's a funny story my mother used to tell

So—

she's been waiting and waiting and finally, finally she gets the call. She's eight-months pregnant and isn't supposed to fly but living with her parents these last months she says, well, if only she'd have thought to eat more beans she probably could have powered over there all by herself she was so ready to get the hell out.

When she got to the airbase they told her the plane wasn't going to make it she'd have to wait until next week. One look at her mother's trembling chin and she pointed to a loaded transport and said, *Where's that one going? This is an emergency.*

In Munich a skinny lieutenant named Eddy drove her to the *Bahnhof* and got her on the right train. She hadn't slept in 36 hours, hadn't showered in 48 she was wrinkled and tired hot and smudged sore and totally unsure if her young husband was going to meet her in Nuremberg or how she was going to know when to get off but most of all, right now, she had to pee.

She lurched back and forth back and forth led down the narrow corridor by the arrow of her belly and the increasingly urgent demands of her bladder, which she placated with constant updates of estimated arrival, disengagement and release schedules. Near the toilet a dapper middle-aged man took her by the elbow and asked (here my mother would put on her Colonel Klink voice): *Would you vant to haf a trink vis me?*

Unable to calculate this into the promises she has been making to her body, let alone to bear even one solitary image of sloshing liquid, immediately and consummately enraged at this unsuspecting man she blurted out the only German word she knew: *Schnauzer!*

vii. summer of 1942

My mother is in hog heaven.  
Her mother couldn't do a thing with her so she was sent  
here to be done something with. She won't  
have to pick a single cherry all summer, or a  
peach or a blueberry, no burnt neck and  
sore back no sticky steaming vats of  
anything no fifty-pound bags of sugar. No  
Rocky either of course, but the first thing  
her uncle did was give her a BB gun and tell her to belly  
down in front of the barn and shoot rats. He  
crouched next to her in his coveralls and  
straw hat, pointed to the places vermin  
could squeeze between the slats. *Nice  
to have a kid like you around*, he said.  
I know you're not afraid of  
hard work

viii. clue

the porter

between the cars

with the pregnant woman

ix. whether it is appropriate to claim that an event is meaningful only in context

I'm thinking of the comic possibilities;  
 imagine those scenes if you could just  
 turn off the sound, speed up the chase sequence  
 like some silent movie with actors  
 you're nearly sure, once, were famous.

There's the lecherous old coot, his bald  
 pate reflecting back your sympathy for all that is  
 folly in our lives, his body bent  
 to the child's height his arms  
 cocked to his sides, loaded for the grab.

We could cut to the Congregational church's thrift  
 shop and the child's great-aunt folding other women's  
 discarded nylon petticoats; her lips move in  
 conversation with Thelma, in the *National  
 Geographic* aisle; the screen then cuts  
 to a scroll of text:

"I thought she'd have more fun  
 with her uncle in the barns  
 than here all morning!"

Back at the farm, the child has made

it to the sprung screen door, down the  
 dissolving concrete steps to the lawn. The  
 uncle watches his great-niece through the thin screen,  
 its holes mended in bright embroidery thread  
 to resemble the idea of flowers.

The child stands to him in profile watches him  
without watching through her peripheral vision  
enough of the child left in her at this moment  
to take comfort in that old saw:  
what you cannot see does not exist.

With the proper editing, you would feel  
the heart-thumping triumph of the child's escape  
you could cut out entirely  
the hours and hours  
before her great-aunt returns.

x. 50 love

Older now, you drop the names  
of your lovers like crumbs  
for your starving mother.

It will be years before you understand  
the astonishment she feels  
at your having grown into a life  
without her.

Meanwhile, you watch, as if from a distance,  
as the flare of your revelation  
exposes a power you did not know you contained  
and which you can wield like an iron bar  
and do

At that moment, when she is fifty,  
and you find yourself revealing details  
you have never told your best friend,  
she looks older than you'll ever remember her.

Is that when she tells you?  
Is that when she rolls back that story you love  
to the point where she lurches back and forth  
back and forth led down the narrow corridor  
by the arrow of her belly?

Or was it some other summer Saturday,  
you on one side of the picnic table  
watching the river swirl and eddy  
past so slowly you can almost expect  
it will pause to breathe  
your mother on the other side, cigarette  
in the fingers of one hand  
sweating beer in the other  
her bridge-player's mind having begun

the tact of this attack  
at some distant moment back in the conversation  
perhaps the moment you realized you could let her  
watch you pull one by one the strings  
of her knowing you out from  
your joined lives.

xi. revision

back and forth back and forth it is chill  
 between the cars in September in Germany  
 in 1955 nothing is quite yet repaired  
 a stone house intact on approach  
 opens like a broken mouth  
 upon the train's retreat  
 the head stinks  
 but she must go, and urgently.

the porter watches her approach  
 from his spring seat near the door  
 how many broken mouths  
 lie hidden behind his gaze in that country  
 saturated with stories beyond telling  
 we will never know,  
 but when he rises to push slide the door aside  
 he does not, then, return to his half sleep  
 on the spring seat  
 but makes a home for his hands  
 from my mother's body, her young woman's body,  
 eight months of child inside

I am ached in that moment, near  
 the muddy river.  
 It will be twenty more years before  
 I put myself again into a position  
 where she can reveal her hand  
 of the tangled web  
 tangled web  
 its tensile strength as yet unmatched  
 by science.



My great-aunt sits at that hard-won farm-wife  
extravagance: The Dining Room Table, with its  
dark, elegant bowed legs, its matching buffet. She bought  
it with green stamps and jars of quarters.

I can easily imagine the catalogue picture in which this set  
appeared: a chandelier surely hung above it there,  
its sleeved candlesticks with bulbs shaped in flames.  
Here, flies buzz helplessly, stuck on curled  
yellow glue papers suspended by cellophane tape from  
the pressed-tin ceiling.

She drums her fingers, then locks  
my eyes, tells me her sister said  
while packing her bag:

*Your husband is a pre-  
vert.*

This is as close as we will go, this landscape of the  
near-word; my aunt tells me without once opening  
her mouth there are certain chasms  
across which no bridge must ever be built and I am  
young enough to believe  
this is true.

xiii. burning a hole

I could have the stretchy red pants  
that flared at the bottom  
the matching striped shirt  
I could have the saddle shoes  
the argyle socks  
My mother would sit endlessly patient  
on a wide variety of moulded plastic chairs  
beneath any number of fluttering fluorescent  
lights while I chose the garment  
of my adolescence  
but she would not under any circumstances  
purchase the pre-bra, that nylon-laced  
minutely flowered slightly elastic chest strap  
that announced my intention to inhabit  
a woman's body  
while my girl's body still appeared ignorant  
of its fate.

When my mother sent me to the farm my great-aunt  
no longer had eggs to candle, stock to feed, stalls  
to clean, nor yet any children or grandchildren to spoil, so  
we drove in her spacious blue Oldsmobile to the Macomb mall,  
that lonely new Mecca squatting in some man's corn field  
almost far from 1971 in Detroit  
and we were truly dazzled by the accumulated wares on display  
and our separate desires were strong; for her, dishes  
and more dishes years beyond the years she fed ten men three  
meals a day; for me, the flimsy allure of unnecessary undergarments  
in materials that slid across my palm  
like the drop of mercury my sister kept  
in a pill bottle in her desk.

I modelled for her, in stores that were not Sears, my  
 child's body transformed beneath the contraband garments.  
 Together, we selected a shimmering, clinging, one-piece  
 camisole that held itself tight by  
 hooks and eyes at the crotch.  
 Later, back at the farm she came  
 to my room and said, *Show him, won't you?*  
 I resisted, but not so long that she might guess why  
 and loathe me.  
 had said while packing her bag your husband is a  
*pre-*  
*vert.*

locked my eyes

there are certain chasms  
 this is as close

xiv. blessed hippocampus

but it does file all the memories  
nevertheless  
somewhere safe lets them slip out  
now and again in case  
you are ready for it to file the memories  
where they belong in case you have  
finally peeled away  
their razor-sharp edges  
with your tongue  
by the telling

xv. in which we discover life does not unfold like a novel, with resolution following climax

My mother sits in a white PVC-tube chair  
with an aqua cushion.  
The wall behind her is white.  
Heavy salt air has begun to erode the fish  
sculpture on the white wall.  
The corrosion is aqua.  
So, I say, that most ubiquitous transition from one  
unrelated subject to another,  
*there's this thing I want to tell you.*

Alternatively, I might have shouted, "Fire!"  
or "Man overboard!" My mother pulled her legs  
from their elevated repose, lit a cigarette,  
jiggled the ice in her tumbler. Alternatively, she might  
have shouted, "Stop, thief!" or  
"Because I said so, that's why!"

*Great-Uncle X abused me as a child*, I state bluntly. She  
was meant to decode: "You know that man you  
revered, the one for whom you named your only son?  
He probed my child's mouth with his tongue, put his fingers and  
hands and worse in places for which I had no names.  
And somehow, at six,  
I already knew I must not tell you."

Alternatively, I could have said, "I have learned that in a situation  
about which one must not speak, one can also  
learn to be sly." The response I expected was:  
"I am sorry," except more so. I expected pulse, schism,  
wrack, for the air to become fuchsia in the beat my pain,  
seared, made me whole.

What she said instead was: *He did that to me too.*  
The moment during which all oxygen  
departed the planet only seemed long. *I've*  
*never told anyone that,* she added.

Alternatively, I could have said, "Language, like  
muscle, can atrophy. By speaking around our  
lives all these years, what we have left are pronouns,  
helping verbs, some serviceable nouns and  
a handful of adjectives. Therefore I say, 'How are you'  
when what I have been waiting for you to hear is:  
'Please, help me.' *Ergo,* while it would be logical  
to pose the question: 'Why?' followed perhaps by  
'Why didn't you warn me?' or 'Why did you let me go there  
unprepared?'" I do  
not.

*Beer?* you ask, standing.

Yes, I say.

## xvi. scrabbling

This much I know is true:  
 my mother goes out, and before her  
 on the round white table are runs  
 and pairs and threes of a kind. *Rummy*,  
 she says, and before I can whimper she  
 looks me in the eye and says, *If I let you win  
 you'll never learn how.*

Thirty-five years later, at another round  
 white table, she places her tiles on the  
 Scrabble board. Her focus is what I wish for  
 in meditation: only the word, this word,  
 and beyond that, in the background,  
 the game. Perhaps what she intended  
 to teach me all those years ago was: fight.  
 What I learned instead was: let them win,  
 if it's so important to them. So, as usual,  
 I avoid INJUNCTION in favour of RAJ and  
 let my mind wander back to a largely silent  
 childhood, spent, or so it seemed, waiting to place  
 my own words in the spaces next to all  
 that could no longer be spoken, like some  
 elaborate, transparent Scrabble game  
 suspended in the air above the blue shag  
 carpeting of our family room, a game  
 which had begun long before my arrival,  
 and which I joined last. So, from ALCOHOL,  
 I made HI; from DEPRESSION,  
 AS; from ABANDON,  
 DO.

In my dreams, there is danger  
near at hand; perhaps a man with an axe,  
perhaps a car with no driver. I struggle to  
speak, can feel the words behind my teeth, the  
pressure building in my chest and throat and then  
I wake, descend the stairs of our sleeping home  
to a kitchen flooded with January's full moon.  
Outside, the paper birch casts its shadow across  
blue snow. I slip on boots, a jacket, then step out  
into the frigid air, wait for a sharp report to shoot  
out from the frozen maples, reverberate across the barn's  
tin roof. There's something cleansing about a cold  
this profound, and I breathe deeply.

When I first became a mother I could  
not tell my son what he most needed to hear  
upon waking from that other world of his  
dreams. *I will always protect you. You are safe here,  
with me.* How could I make such a promise? How?

I have since learned there is only one way:  
to open my mouth,  
to believe.