

Stephanie Bolster / SEVEN POEMS

VORTEX

On the corner of Broadway and Blenheim under the golden arches, a woman sits on the sidewalk, looks through the magician's hat of her purse, hoping for tricks. Beside the gape of her car's open door, the hum of the engine desperate to go somewhere, she finds a pack of cigarettes, a pink lipstick, a sliver of mirror.

The white-bearded man on the opposite corner thinks he is God. He faces the wind, the approaching bus, his hair blown back. He could turn her stray tissue to a single dove, he thinks. Her wallet could swell with wealth. He could do all this if he wanted, if he thought it mattered; if he loved her there, rummaging.

The driver of the bus wants only for the long hand of his watch to reach the top, when the bus will empty of laughter and chat and reach the lot, rattle into silence. Wants only his shoeless feet on the coffee table, his back against the stained cushions of the couch.

What happens is a fluke of electricity sprung free when the bus leaps its wires. The woman's purse turns to a waistcoat, the contents to a rabbit with nickels for eyes, maxi-pad ears, a chain of clinking keys instead of a watch.

She follows its hopping over the cracks in the sidewalk, watches it lift the manhole cover & descend. (The hum of her car an enigma, the door flung wide.) The bus driver adjusting his wires, the lonely man with the beard, both turn as she drops through, feel the shock in their teeth as her body goes, the cloud of her permed hair a possibility vanishing.

25 APRIL 1856

How was it that first time, did they meet
through a simple raising of eyebrows, curious:
her about these 2 tall men with cumbersome
paraphernalia, him about these 3 little girls
playing in the Deanery garden.

The men had come to photograph the Cathedral,
but Dodgson put the children
in the foreground, an experiment;
first the flood of chemicals, *collodion* and *silver nitrate*,
then 45 long seconds of stillness,
and she only 4 and quick.

He was 24 then, did not choose her
as his favourite until the *Adventures*
6 years later. But something began
that afternoon, marked in his diary with a white stone.

Perhaps it was the garden, Alice and her sisters
2 years on either side of her, blooming amongst
the flowers of April, in England.
Her hair a brown thatch, cut straight
across the forehead, her dark blue eyes
tight buds. The possibility of spring
and he only 24 and searching.

Although accustomed to gazes, to arranging
hands (her father was Dean of Christ Church, her mother
dressed the girls the same, so they would look
a picture) Alice remembered this one man, remembered
his stiffness, as though he had swallowed a poker.
He seemed afraid of her, and that was something,

her only 4 and him old enough
to be her father, how they both stood
tense and ticking
in the infinite unfurling garden
during the long exposure.

WHICHEVER RABBIT

Had it been Peter, rather than White, she'd followed
that lazy afternoon, she would have found
not the falling, but the hole
in a fence, mesh outstretched to snag her there.

No ticking of a pocketwatch this time,
no key to unlock some tiny door.
She would have crawled through
in her own size, emerged torn and scratched
but otherwise intact, into the waiting garden,
to the déjà vu of a rabbit's retreating tail.

This garden fountainless, lacking white or red
roses, unthreatened by upstanding cards.
Here would be safety, carrots
and the delicacy of young lettuce, her hands prying food
from the warm earth, knowing its taste
would not change her.

But then the man from the farmhouse, Mr. McGregor,
shouting he'd have her, head and all. The rabbit scrambling,
the gap between wire much too small for her hips.
This King booming out a proclamation, louder
than the Queen of Hearts': *Get out.*

If Peter left his coat behind as evidence
then she would leave baby fat, flat chestedness.
Stumble home in the dark
clutching a gnawed carrot, knowledge of the garden.

DERIVATIONS

As a child I considered changing my name, paid 49¢ of my allowance at the supermarket checkout for *3500 Names for Baby*, chose a new one every week and demanded my family call me that. I still have Christmas gift tags addressed to “Anna;” remember signing myself “Amanda;” contemplated “Antonia” because I’d wanted as my best friend an Antonia in a book I’d read, and because the name dictionary said it meant “super-excellent.”

I must have found the B’s less interesting or grown tired by that point, skipped all the way to the given sinuousness of S, remembered a segment on *Sesame Street* claiming that letter began more words than any other in the alphabet.

I never considered Agnes, Abigail, Arlene, and somehow I skipped Alice. Whether this was because it already belonged to my grandmother (Catherine Alys, a spelling I could never remember, wanted to pronounce “alleys”) or because of my mother’s friend with that name (who’d made her own children eat tuna casserole but not me) or because it was too steeped in the ordinary, I do not know. The wonderland book lay downstairs in unread anonymity.

Now Alice seems the most delicate of the A's, suggesting
alyssum, whispers. None of the visual ice
infects the sound, the hushed sweetness, the careful authority
of alphabetical beginnings.

Like my name, Alice apparently derives
from the Greek. I see her astride a winged horse, or carved in marble,
worshipped in secret near the sea under a cloudless sky.
If I believe the little book, then Alice means truth.

TO SUSANNA: WITH BELATED CONSOLATIONS

Alice was an immigrant too, only
not yet written. You left England in 1832,
she crawled away 30 years later.
Both of you in the scorch of summer

went underground, explored
root, the composition of soil,
found the sudden darkness

of winter. Your husband shot rabbits
and Alice greeted them, her quivering bare
legs attempting a curtsy. What she met
you ate, stripped of its skin.

If she had existed earlier
you could have read of her journey,
seen your own journal suddenly
redeemed. Alone in the dark

cabin with all your children
you could have read the story aloud,
caught shimmers of delight and familiar
fear in those eyes,
too young to fully understand
the world they had been shoved into,
but still knowing. That long shiver

up the spine when Alice plunged,

emerged dripping on the other side
of her own tears.

HALF-SICK OF SHADOWS

Alice grew huge,

became the caster of shadows
rather than the one cast
in their darkness.

Became the giant
part of herself that carried
its own shadow
around with it

like a bag of ashes.

THE REAL ALICE

This biography recounts your romance
with a haemophiliac prince
(youngest son of Queen Victoria) whom the likes of you
could not have married; the naming
of his second child after you,
your second after him.

It records your wedding to an undergraduate
(*the nicest, kindest young man imaginable,*
and not totally unintelligent by any means)
where the bells at Oxford rang for an hour,

and Dodgson's gift of a gilt-framed watercolour
was omitted from your extensive list
(*Mr and Mrs Conbeare, lotus-leaf*
silver toast-rack and walnut tea-table;
Viscount and Viscountess Cranbrook, silver looking-glass)
for no given reason.

A family tree details the blood
that links you to the present
Queen (fifth cousin thrice removed),
records your third son as Caryl,
a name you said was simply
from a novel.

Your life a catalogue of deaths —
your frail prince from falling down stairs;
several of your siblings
in childhood; two of your sons
in war — and then Dodgson's funeral,
one you did not attend, though sent
a floral tribute.

After your husband's death,
of all valuables you chose to sell the original
manuscript of *Alice* for house repairs
and servants' wages, though why
remains unwritten.

The insufficiency of such godless details, the absences
that can never explain the crowning one: the missing

smile from your face in photographs,
even in childhood, and at 80
when Columbia University presented you
with an honorary doctorate

and a three-tier
birthday cake laden with icing
and the characters of Wonderland; when Caryl

told reporters your favourite
character was the Chesire Cat.

(Italicized passages are quotations from Anne Clark, *The Real Alice: Lewis Carroll's Dream Child*. London: Michael Joseph, 1981.)