

Maya Jewell Zeller

Questions for the Immigrant's Daughter and *After the Birth of My Daughter, I Try to Imagine My Father as a Child*



Photo by John Simpkins: First snow on Steen Mountains, looking west from Old Andrews School, late fall.

Questions for the Immigrant's Daughter

When you were eight, was that your favorite food?: the shit on a shingle your dad cooked, nostalgically, in the cast iron skillet, his Bud Light half gone but still fizzing when he began to spread the gravy and beef on toast?

Or did you prefer to wander the scrub forests of Ocean Park, searching for huckleberries and chewing the end of a long grass stem? Did you braid those grasses? What shapes did you make?

Was it the ocean in your lungs that drew you across the sand dunes to the

After the Birth of My Daughter, I Try to Imagine My Father as a Child

I.
In The Birth of the Virgin, there is no visible sign of afterbirth: no veiny placenta like a swollen leaf or white cord carrying its necessary gifts into a new emptiness; and the water we assume to be hot, clean as a spring, is poured into its basin by a woman in a green dress with a red petticoat. She and the three others wear white cloths on their heads like crowns, even the mother whose one hand rests over her groin and whose other covers her

wide roaring sea?

Did you leave your shoes by the long bleached driftwood logs, run in, that crisp cold on your feet and your wild hair behind you?

Did you move from here to a river bend in the Willapa hills where your parents tried to open a tavern? How long did you live in that apartment above the tavern, your floor thumping while you slept? How well did you sleep?

Did you get called names in school? What names? Why don't you remember?

Do you know any German? Don't you know any nice words in German? Did your father only speak it when he was drunk?

Was the river full of gulls and smelt? Was the river full of light? Was it the sea lion in your veins that drew you through the fields to the slow hips of a clay bank?

Did you go down into it, your wild hair behind you?

Did you go in beyond your ankles, learning rivers more forgiving than the wide pond of the Pacific?

Did you learn how those who gather around the river are less forgiving than the river itself?

Did you learn to swim here? To defend yourself? The names of the plants that grew along the banks?

How could you tell nettle from salmonberry? Thistle from barbed wire fence?

You slept sometimes in the fields? You slept sometimes like a deer? How warm was the barn when you slept there? How warm was the van when you slept there?

When you were ten, where did you live?

breast as if to protect it from the painter.

That cryptic cave of reproduction remains whole, remains mysterious.

So my father has no reason to think his mother's organs—when she is no longer using them, when her uterus sits in her body like an appendix—will fail her, warp like the roses along the sea, their pink petals browning in its jade spray like fingernails too long in the garden. He knows nothing of these organs.

II.

And is the human body full of vestigial parts, the underdeveloped ear tendons that don't make our ears flick, the coccyx which does not support a tail?

III.

My father's father tells him she is not very sick. The doctors they've come to the states to see can work miracles. My father probably pictures them to be like Jesus, water falling from his hands. He probably pictures baby Mary in the painting floating above her mother, healing all her sore muscles, putting blood back in the right places.

I want to go to him, let his young head fall against my chest, stroke his hair as I would my daughter's when she slips and hits her body against cement.

IV.

I can't imagine my grandmother believed in angels, but stars that light a sky she could handle.

But in the painting, the mother's window looks out on more stone, some kind of wall, perhaps, as if to suggest the only life worth knowing is inside the room. Except the mother is not looking at anyone.

V.

The room of the self could be full of locked closets, closets stocked in boxes, boxes home to objects of insignificance to anyone but the boy who stored them.

VI.

Maya Jewell Zeller is the author of the book *Rust Fish* (poetry, Lost Horse Press). Her essays are forthcoming/appear in recent issues in *Pleiades* and *Bellingham Review*. Maya serves as Fiction Editor for *Crab Creek Review*, co-director of the Beacon Hill Reading series, and teacher of composition at Gonzaga University. She also spends ample time playing with two small children in the woods and river paths of Spokane.

In streams, the caddisfly larva builds a home of silk and rock. As a girl, I would pile them in my hand, tiny stones like teeth misshapen and laid, bead-like, in hard cloth. We called them periwinkles, not the flower that bloomed small pieces of sky out of the viney earth, but the route to the flower: something that would fly toward the land, its body shaking off water.

You have to have a special eye to see them on the creek bed. Like fingers of rock, like the shaft of a gun, like fish swimming beneath the dents of current a trained glance can find quickly.

I don't need to tell you they cut through their cases and swim to the surface fully-formed adults, that they will live just a few weeks only to mate, lay eggs, die.

VII.

Outside the virgin's window the wall lets you imagine scenes in the stone.

And back in the room where his mother is breathing her grainy breaths, her forehead hot, my father is not allowed to touch her. He is not allowed in her room.

VIII.

I think my grandmother died when my father was nine. If this is true, then in a few years, the wall which divides Germany will rise like the dream my father has of his mother walking into his house alive again. He will be on the streets of America then, learning to steal metal, sell it for cash. He will be walking the high ridge of morning with his hands ready. He wants to hold something, to let it go of his own accord.

He will not know how to go back to the house where his father has married a new woman who, like most stepmothers, hates her inherited children. My father will spend his nickels on cigarettes, their ash falling like burned bodies. He will watch the dawn and dream an artist's dream in which a mother turns away from the

**wall, places her hands on her infant
son.**

