

PATRICIA SMITH

## *Pearl, Upward*

FROM *Crab Orchard Review*

CHICAGO. SAY IT. Push out the three sighs, don't let such a huge wish languish. Her world, so big she didn't know its edges, suddenly not enough. She's heard the dreams out loud, the tales of where money flows, and after you arrive it takes *what, a minute?* to forget that Alabama ever held sugar for you.

She wants to find a factory where she can work boredom into her fingers. She's never heard a siren razor the dark. She wants Lucky Strikes, a dose of high life every Friday, hard lessons from a jukebox. Wants to wave goodbye to her mama and a God not particular to ugly. Just the word *city* shimmies her. All she needs is a bus ticket, a brown riveted case to hold her dresses, and a waxed bag crammed with smashed slices of white bread and doughy fried chicken splashed with Tabasco. This place, Chicago, is too far to run. But she knows with the whole of her heart that it is what she's been running toward.

Apple cheeks, glorious gap-tooth fills the window of the Greyhound. For the occasion, she has hot-combed her hair into shivering strings and donned a homemade skirt that wrestles with her curves. This deception is what the city asks. I dream her sleeping at angles, her head full and hurting with future, until the bus arrives in the city. Then she stumbles forth with all she owns, wanting to be stunned by some sudden thunder. Tries not to see the brown folks—the whipcloth shoe shiners, the bag carriers—staring at her, searching for some sign, craving a smell of where she came from.

How does a city look when you've never seen it before? Grimace

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and whisper hover everywhere. It is months before she realizes that no one knows her name. No one says Annie Pearl and means it.

She crafts a life that is dimmer than she'd hoped, in a tenement flat with walls pressing in hard and fat roaches, sluggish with Raid, dropping into her food, writhing on the mattress of her Murphy bed. In daytime, she works in a straight line with other women, her hands moving without her. *Repeat. Repeat.* When her evenings are breezy and free and there is change in her purse, she looks for music that whines, men in sharkskin suits, a little something to scorch her throat. Drawn to the jukebox, she punches one letter, one number, hears her story sung over and over in indigo gravel. And she cries when she hears what has happened to homemade guitars. They've forgotten how much they need the southern moon.

At night when she tries to sleep, Alabama fills her head with a cruel grace, its colors brighter, and its memory impossibly wide. She remembers the drumbeat she once was.

My mother, Annie Pearl Smith, never talks with me of Annie Pearl Connor, the girl she was before she boarded that Greyhound, before she rolled into the city. The South, she insists, was the land of clipped dreaming, ain't got nones and never gon' haves. Alabama only existed to be left behind. It's as if a whole new person was born on that bus, her first full breath straining through exhaust, her first word *Chicago*.

But from her sisters I heard stories of what a raging tomboy she was, how it seemed like she was always running.

Whenever I dream her young, I see red dust on her ankles and feet. Those feet were flat and ashy, steady stomping, the corn on her baby toe raw and peeled back. No shoes could hold them. Those feet were always naked, touched by everything, stones asked her to limp and she didn't. Low branches whipped, sliced her skin, and they urged her to cry and she wouldn't. Blood dripped and etched rivers in rust.

She was a blazing girl, screech raucous and careening, rhymes and games and dares in her throat. Her laugh was a shattering on the air. Playing like she had to play to live, she shoved at what slowed her, steamrolled whatever wouldn't move. Alabama's no fool. It didn't get in her way.

What was down south then, then where she romped and ran? Slant sag porches, pea shuck, twangy box guitars begging under

blue moons. Combs spitting sparks, pull horses making back roads tremble, swear-scowling elders with rheumy glares fixed on checkboards. Cursed futures crammed into cotton pouches with bits of bitterroot and a smoldering song. Tragic men buckling under the weight of the Lord's work, the grim rigidity of His word. The horrid parts of meat stewed sweet and possible. And still, whispers about the disappeared, whole souls lost in the passage.

There was nothing before or beyond just being a southern girl, when there was wind to rip with your body and space to claim. Her braids always undid themselves. She panted staccato, gulped steam, and stopped sometimes to rest her feet in meandering water. But why stop when she was the best reason she knew to whip up the air?

And yes, she also owned that slower face. She could be the porch-swinging girl, good to her mama and fixed on Jesus, precious in white collar ironed stiff and bleached to the point of blue. She could make herself stand patient in that Saturday morning kitchen assembly line, long enough to scrape the scream from chitlins and pass the collards three times under the faucet to rinse away the grit. She could set the places at the table and straight sit through endless meals she doesn't have time to taste.

She wore that face as Saturday night's whole weight was polished and spit-shined for Sunday morning. Twisting in the pew and grimacing when her mother's hand pushed down hard on her thigh in warning. *Girl, how many times I got to tell you God don't like ugly?* To her, righteousness was a mystery that rode the edge of an organ wail. She'd seen the Holy Ghost seep into the old women, watched as their backs cracked, eyes bulged, careful dresses rose up. She wondered how God's hot hand felt in their heads, how they danced in ways so clearly beyond them. Decided there would be time enough for this strange salvation. First she had to be young.

All the time her toes tapped, feet flattened out inside her shoes. The sun called her name and made her heart howl. She was a drumbeat, sometimes slow and thoughtful on deep thick skins, most times asking something, steady asking, needing to know, needing to know *now*, taking flight from that rhythm inside her. Twisting on rusty hinge, the porch door whined for one second 'bout where she was. But that girl was gone.

I dream her brave, unleashed, naughty the way free folks are. Playing and frolicking her fill, flailing tough with cousins and sisters, but running wide, running on purpose, running toward something. She couldn't name this chaos, but she believed it knew her, owned her in a way religion should.

At night, the brooding sky pushed down on her tired head, made her stay in place. She sweated outside the sheets. Kicked. Headed somewhere past this.

Anybody know how a Delta girl dreams? How the specter of a city rises up in her head and demands its space and time? How borders and boxes are suddenly magic, tenements harbor pulse, and the all there is must be a man with a felt fedora dipped lazily over one eye? She was turning into a woman, tree trunk legs, exclamation just over her heart. Alabama had to strain to hold on.

Oh, her hips were always there, but suddenly they were a startling fluid and boys lined the dust road and she slowed her run to rock them. Soon she was walking in circles. Then she was barely moving at all. Stones asked her to limp and she did. She was scrubbing her feet in river water and searching for shoes.

Chicago.

Chicago.

The one word sounded like a secret shared. And, poised in that moment before she discovered the truth, Annie Pearl Connor was catch-in-the-breath beautiful. She was sweet in that space between knowing and not knowing.

Months later, her face pressed against a tenement window, she is a note so incredibly blue only the city could sing it.

She has to believe that love will complete her.

And so she finds him, a man who seems to be what Chicago lied and said it was. He smolders, gold tooth flashing. He promises no permanence. She walks into the circle of his arms and stands very still there. There must be more than this, she believes, and knows she must fill her body with me, that she must claim her place in the north with a child touting her blood. Hot at the thought of creation, she is driven by that American dream of birthing a colorless colored child with no memories whatsoever of the Delta.

It is a difficult delivery, with no knife slipped below the bed to cut the pain. In a room of beeping machines and sterilized silver,

she can't get loose. Her legs are bound. Her hands are being held down. She screams, not from pain but from knowing. My mother has just given worry to the world.

There will be no running from this.

This child is a chaos she must name.

ZADIE SMITH

## *Generation Why?*

FROM *The New York Review of Books*

HOW LONG IS a generation these days? I must have been in Zuckerberg's generation—there are only nine years between us, somehow it doesn't feel that way. This despite the fact that I (like everyone else on Harvard's campus in the '90s) was "I was there" at Facebook's inception, and remember the fuss it caused; also that tiny, exquisite moment when she and the fan-boys through the snow wherever she went, and she snowed herself, turning your toes gray, destroying your nose, a bloodless end to a squirrel on my block: frozen, perfect—like the Blaschka glass flowers. Doubtless I will misremember my closeness to Zuckerberg, but I do remember that everyone in '60s Liverpool met John Lennon.

At the time, though, I felt distant from Zuckerberg and the other kids at Harvard. I still feel distant from them now. I increasingly opt out (by choice, by default) of the culture they have embraced. We have different ideas about what a person is, or how we have different ideas about what a person is, or how often we worry that my idea of personhood is nostalgic and out of date. Perhaps Generation Facebook have built their lives in good faith, in order to house the People 2.0, but they are, and if I feel uncomfortable within them it is because they are Person 1.0. Then again, the more time I spend with them, the more I am convinced I become that some of the software of my generation is unworthy of them. They are more worthy than it is. They deserve better.

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