

The Familiar

Poems

Sarah Kain Gutowski

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“The boundary between the imaginary and the real is even less distinct in this troubled period than during puberty. One of the most salient characteristics in the aging woman is the depersonalization that makes her lose all objective landmarks. People in good health who have come close to death also say they have felt a curious impression of doubling; when one feels oneself to be consciousness, activity, and freedom, the passive object affected by fate seems necessarily like another: *I am not the one run over by a car. I am not the old woman the mirror shows me.*”

— Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

“We aren’t here to make things perfect. The snowflakes are perfect. The stars are perfect. Not us. Not us! We are here to ruin ourselves and to break our hearts and love the wrong people and die. The storybooks are bullshit.”

— Ronny Cammareri, *Moonstruck* (written by John Patrick Shanley, directed by Norman Jewison)

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familiar
fuh-mil-yer

— noun

8. a familiar friend or associate

9. Also called familiar spirit. Witchcraft and Demonology. A supernatural spirit or demon, often in the form of an animal, supposed to serve and aid a witch or other individual.

10. Roman Catholic Church:

a. an officer of the Inquisition, employed to arrest accused or suspected persons.

b. a person who belongs to the household of the pope or a bishop, rendering domestic though not menial service.

*from Dictionary.com Unabridged,
based on the Random House Unabridged
Dictionary*

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We Want for More

Among the garden's weeds my extraordinary self sits,
wondering how she came to this: banishment, but gradual—
an exile by degrees. One day, praise like sun in June; then

shadow: not so much reprisal as silence, stretched long
as overcast sky. Now, squatting near the mute watermelon
and cucumber hills, ornamental leaves that don't belong

catch her eye. She marvels at the weed's tenacity, how it
clings to the other plants, how much precision and time
it takes to remove tendrils of bad from good. Despite

the low clouds, my extraordinary self is a burnt mess,
and between the pain peeling her shoulders and soil
that coats her teeth, she cannot help but feel self-pity,

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watching her image distort in the weed's gloss then
disappear when she removes the vine. It seems
a shame to waste such ambition, such determination,

but the purslane—flowering, delectable when consumed—
threatens the cultivated vegetables and fruit. It's beautiful,
but wrong for this patch of earth. She slices its roots

with her spade and scatters the knots and emerald stalks
and gorgeous vine into the compost heap. *Little sister,*
she thinks. *It's time to leave. We want for more than we should.*

A Great Damage

My ordinary self wakes but can't remember when she fell asleep in this room: The sheets, slick with damp, feel unfamiliar; grit rims her eyelids and even

the mattress feels foreign, like something loaned from memory's recesses. We haven't seen her for years. She hasn't been allowed to visit. Now she's here

suddenly, as if summoned by a spell, and welcomed—coaxed and flattered by our pleas. Desperation's humidity rises from the bed. Daylight, dishwashers, doctor's offices—

my ordinary self must become reacquainted with ordinary living. She wanders the rooms. Her feet sink, make light depressions in the carpet and brief, dark splotches

on the hard wood. She thinks about making an appointment for an oil change. She consults the kitchen's calendar, but its coded loops of pen and cross-outs confuse, refuse to clarify.

There's too much to undo here, she thinks. A great damage has been done. Panic beads her skin. As if on cue from our bedroom's shadows, the clock shrieks in alarm.

A Little Push

My extraordinary self turned out to be less extraordinary than we'd anticipated. She wasn't even good at packing up her things: she kept removing, then replacing, her tap shoes

and favorite sequined gowns—glitter escaping cellophane to coat her fingers, the bedspread, all surfaces inside and beyond her suitcase. Now we find reminders of her

everywhere. My ordinary self lifts the shades in the morning and frowns—sunlight refracts off tiny squares adhered to the nightstand, the hamper's wicker rings. This will take

hours and days to remove. Her personal items sit tossed in a corner, what we found after she'd left: wads of foreign paper currency; a camera leaking acrid batteries;

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the loose ephemera of a brief photography career. She left not in a rush but in a cloud of disarray and tears, the melodrama that marked her too overwrought

for the stage. She didn't want to stay but didn't want to go, didn't want to make the decision to separate. My ordinary self gave her a little push: nothing too

vicious, just pressure along the shoulders that said: *This is your direction*. It was the tree leaves grinding like teeth that whispered: *It won't do any good to look back*.

Gooseflesh

If she'd been around for those missing years,
my ordinary self wonders, would our life now be this
sad collection? She surveys the disrepair and marvels

at the neglect: The splintered cabinetry. Scratched
floorboards. Sheetrock nails pushing ghostly thumbs
through thinning, spectral paint. She pulls open

the closet door, looses its demon: hot breath spews forth
coats and boots and mittens. *We need a priest, not a maid,*
she thinks. Down the road, inside a motel room

or the car she's made her home, my extraordinary self's
skin crawls with a flush of cold. Hairs stand on end
like someone walks—no, stomps—across her grave.

Naming

My ordinary self insists -- from doctors, to teachers,
to butchers, to the crossing guard by the funeral home—
Names are so important. She has the children look up

everyday birds in the garden: Catbird. Grackle. Starling.
Together they create tags for the plants and shrubs:
Cyclamen. Hydrangea. Rose of Sharon. She even helps

the clerk identify herbs at checkout: *This, oregano. This,*
sage. She writes everything down. *Everyone prefers*
the correct label to the wrong, she says, and most prefer

a label even if they insist out loud they don't. My ordinary self,
for instance, takes pleasure from hers: Proficient. Able.
Steady. On her arm, tattooed in script: *uidelicet incorruptum.*

Time to Clean

She wasn't extraordinary, my extraordinary self,
for the measure of her accomplishments. Rather,
her visions were operatic, symphonic, and robust.

It was her effort's tenor, its deep vibrating notes
that made those plans appear unique. And yet
so much broken glass, so much mess in endeavor.

So many busted enamel shards, rusted cables,
antique lamps collecting dust. The unused spools
of twine, boxes of glue, parts for builds abandoned.

Piles of books, face-down and dog-eared,
then forgotten. So much everything
and so much nothing—enthusiasm multiplied

and left to molder in humid air: A warehouse
for unrealized dreams. Simply put, it was time
to clean. But it was difficult for her to let go:

We were crows chasing each other from the trees—
clarion in our anger. All around our home,
broken spider silk drifted in the breeze.

The Rational Optimist

The consummate wife, my ordinary self helps my husband pack when he needs to leave on business, a checklist of items in her back jeans pocket, her knack for rolling clothes

and using shoes for storage such a boon. When there's time she leaves notes folded inside his shirt pockets, or tucked within his cufflinks box. Such a difference from when

my extraordinary self would see him off—her petulant silence a lock to which we'd all forgotten the combination. Sometimes I think she hid his passport just to keep him home extra

minutes, each one tense as stand-by. How patient he was, back then, to withstand this torture because he was leaving, supporting his family; all the while his wife resentful,

8 her jealousy slender but sharp as a new moon. My ordinary self is far more rational, and an optimist. Awakened for a pre-dawn send-off, she kisses him softly, says she'll see him soon.

They Sing Her Praises

In something of a paradox, my ordinary self is rather extraordinary. My ordinary self has follow-through. Not all of the natural world—or the unnatural—has this

persistence, the dogged will to see a thing done to its very damn end. That's why she's so good at laundry. She remembers how important it is

to keep the clothes from pressing too far into one another, creating canyons of wrinkles. She avoids embarrassing piles of socks and thongs

and linens from forming new terrain on the furniture. She hangs when delicates need drying, folds when the cycle is finished. She itemizes by type,

material, color and care. These days no one ever goes without matching socks, unless by choice. My ordinary self is tireless albeit weary

of fitted sheets and their stubborn, imperfect corners. In the basement laundry crickets keep her company. They sing her praises in the dark, though no one listens.

Climate of Destruction

When she reenters the office, my ordinary self recognizes signs of storm and stress, my extraordinary self's chaotic occupancy. She flicks the computer on. It groans in protest,

slicks blue light across every object beneath the monitor's patient face. She searches for the keyboard, but a label maker's all she finds under last quarter's financials.

Piles of drop-and-run litter the desk: leather portfolios crowded with legal pads, accordion files spilling receipts, torn staples, chains of paper clips, pens without caps

buried like shallow land mines and blooming red wounds across take-out napkins. Underneath the desk, where her feet should rest, boxes of yellowed paper files decamp.

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A cricket carcass dries to dust beside them. On the shelves manilla folders buckle like a collapsed bridge beneath stacks of books. She moves aside a dead plant and types

a memo: *To the occupant(s): Please remember the company cannot sustain growth in a pervasive climate of destruction and disorganization.* She hits Print. Across the hall

paper jams and another machine complains. She turns on the overhead fluorescent lights. The whole room hums with stark dissatisfaction. Her pupils shrink to pin pricks.

Dreaming and What-ifs

Overwhelmed by all she has been tasked to do, my ordinary self calls a meeting. We sit down and brainstorm a way to make her transition manageable.

We bullet-item lists and create spreadsheets. We draft mission and vision statements and action plans, and when our eyes begin to glaze, fingers cramped from note-taking,

my ordinary self stands and says, *All right. Let's get to work.* This is crucial, this difference between my two selves: my ordinary self's literal movement away

from the pens and pads of planning. She doesn't mess around. Somewhere—not too far away, but removed from here—at a similar table, my extraordinary self stares

at a lamp's glass bell as if she could read our future. Yet she's naught but dreaming and what-ifs—under her, so little came to fruition. She played us: all glad-handing

and misdirection, and wouldn't admit failure, even when smoke alarms sounded and ash flitted through the air like kitchen moths born from the stale and fetid.