

John Griswold

I Didn't Know

A white marble statue,
size of a cat,
demure as a cat,
squats on a shelf by an east window,
smiling
under dust and the ink my childish pen traced in its
contours.

Cracked with water-swollen wedges from one of five
stone mountains,
the one they call "Heaven,"
carved with an iron adze and chisels by a craftsman
at Non Nuoc,
it sits now,
amused,
surrounded by my son's

Babar, Nessie,
George, Curiously cheeky,
a Harrod's bear in a Guard's bearskin
hat,
Thomas the Tank Engine and Elmo.

I didn't know
for a long time
my mother bought the little statue in Ben Thanh in
'63,
expatriated it to Southern Illinois
locked in a *wunderkammer* the size of a coffin with
an old lei

a tiger-skin pocketbook
 a concubine's wooden headrest
 a Thai Ramayana rubbing of a demon
 seducing a maiden
 a junk in full sail, made of amber and
 ebony horn of water buffalo
 silk kimonos for man and wife.

A thousand petit riches in the trunk amid other
 clutter in the closed-off bedroom
 with her other curations:

a grocery sack of my Kodachrome father,
 chintz china of my father's mother, dead,
 the treadle Singer of her own mother,
 dead,
 the horsehair blanket her dead Daddy lay
 across his lap in his Ford motor.

All the exotic dry rot without context or catalogue,
 jewel-headed insects in a black widow's web.

She smiled
 when I begged to see,
 pleased at my interest,
 happy to help me hold ivory chopsticks,
 proud to tell old stories,

how Vietnamese on the street asked to
 touch my sister's golden hair,
 how Phuong, her maid,
 a clever girl but confused had asked,
 "Madame want soup? Madame want
 soap?"

My mother served all memories, savory, sweet, or
 bitter, equally.

How a man in the market had had his
 nose cut off by Communists,
 you could see into his skull,
 how the Saigon nurses giggled with
 pleasure that I was born a boy,

and on Ho Chi Minh's birthday,
how she was there when Thich Quang
Duc immolated himself in protest,
that the human body, anyone, everyone,
melts like butter if there's enough heat,
she said.

I didn't know that about democracy.

Oh, people are all alike, she assured me.
Old Man Thornton in his market on Stotlar Street,
(where I bought firecrackers she forbade)
cheated his townspeople on loaves of bread—let
alone meat!
Pulpit penitents, tears running down their cheeks,
all cheating bastards, she said,
those men bawling in church on Sunday
(while my friends and I giggled over new lyrics to
hymns),
and balling their secretaries Monday noon in the
Herrin Motel.
She didn't much care for the manager of
Woolworth's either
but made me apologize to him when I stole a little
View-Master Jesus on a keychain.
Hold it to the sun, and He gazes on you.
I was four, and my cheeks burned from it.
She smiled down at me with compassion and mercy.

My mother made me laugh,
impressions of a schizophrenic cousin, doing the
bickering voices,
hulking across our living room like a local boor, my
school's principal,
her mimicking wheedle-dee-dee of the American
consul in Saigon, who
counseled with the voice of Slim Pickens

to return to our compound near Ton Son Nhut
after my father tried to slap me from her arms.

The bull dyke who lived next to us in Saigon,
a woman ex-Marine, no b.s. there, boy,
told me she would have whacked your father in the
head with
a Griswold cast-iron skillet while he slept.
I didn't know that
so my mother told me and we laughed.

She smiled when she packed me off to show-and-tell
at Bible Camp
with her white marble Buddha,
a rare appearance for the little guy,
in on the joke I didn't yet get.
Her Daddy, the senator, union head, had been an
alderman in that church, but
my mother resigned as secretary
due to their complete and total hypocrisy,
jerks looked down on a single mother
when it was your father the one ran off with that
whore.
Now hurry or you'll miss it entirely.
As long as it was on the way we drove past that
woman's house to see
was his Chevy in her ugly drive.

I didn't know
he didn't even know that woman any more or
that that car had been sold down the river long
before.
He had taken another post with US AID, in Kabul,
learned some Pashtu, gazed up the Khyber Pass,
discarded his memories of Southeast Asia,
the pet monkey,

the state dinner where they served chicks
baked in egg cups,
the impotent .22 he hid in a nightstand
drawer,
his wife and newborn son,
and replaced them with Khan and his tribes.
My father, not one to keep photographs,
worked, fucked, ate, and unsentimentally moved to
Jakarta, Beirut, Paris.

“Jesus Loves Me, This I Know,”
grape Kool-Aid and sandwich cookies,
then the women helped me lift the Buddha
onto the folding crafts table like
a baby at a baptism.
“Oh, me,” they said with rictus grins.
The next kid showed off a crucifix his daddy cut
from sulphur coal,
black as sin and twice as oily.

I didn't know
not to draw on the Buddha
so it got buried for safekeeping in the trunk
mysterious with camphor and cedar.
For years I contemplated it from the outside.
In my mind it became
something like
the portmanteau Joan must have carried
into battle,
the carriage trunk Marie's footmen
dropped to mutton stares,
the kind of trunk
Miss Havesham folded dowry into,
Amanda Wingfield dragged up from the
plantation,

Amelia Earhart dragged down to the
coral.

The sort wheeled along platforms by Polish beauties
as the Germans hit town.

A trunk that someone like, oh,

Margaret Bourke-White

Clare Boothe Luce

Pearl S. Buck or

Martha Gellhorn Hemingway

redcapped on Pan Am when winging far away.

I didn't know

why my mother became a recluse in the detritus of
memory.

Her humor seemed intact.

When I released the dozens of cats held captive in

our bathroom while we ate,

they piled over each other coming out the door,

claws and tails and terrified eyes,

cascades of frantic cats

suddenly freed like water from a dam, and

my mother laughed and laughed.

"Stampede!" she yelled, apparently

delighted at the surreal anarchy of the world.

Every spring they died of feline distemper,

lay wrapped in newspaper like cold fish while

we dug together in the side yard, furtive as grave
robbers.

Our shovels grated on previous years' delicate old
bones.

I didn't know,

but my mother told me

she had always done what she liked,

laughed how she got a pilot's license in secret when

Daddy wouldn't let her be a WAAC,

how he forced the annulment with her common foot
soldier, but anyway

she'd been a secretary for LIFE,
a teacher with a Master's,
lived in West Palm Beach,
had two other husbands, and
now threw rejected washing machine
baskets
into hopper cars on the siding of a filthy
factory
at 62 years of age.

There was something funny in that
I didn't know.

When we
took her from her home and
put her in a home,
she smirked and nodded with palsy.
Mute and demure.
I knew it all along, she seemed to imply.
Cleaned out the debris,

 piles of old news,
 cat-pissed divan,
 lamps cancered with rust,
 ruined beds clothes sacks piano pots
 and that trunk, which I broke open with
 a knife,

 the key long gone, to find the
 Eternal within.

It rests now, for a mote in its geologic mind, on my
shelf in the sun.

I didn't know
until I was 33
and my mother's brain had gone smooth
that it's not the Buddha at all but

smiling Quan Am,
 she “who-listens-to-the-world’s-cries,”
 bodhisattva of compassion for those who suffer,
 because they remember,
 because pain is supremely democratic,
 because they hold back, to pass on bitter
 wisdom,
 for those who, afraid of impermanence, need
 something cold and heavy
 to hold
 to hoard
 to treasure
 to lie inside
 to prove they’re still alive.

What did I know about
 a woman, smiling?

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 and *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*. He teaches at the University of Illinois, Urbana-
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