
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Barbara Rothstein and Carolyn Ziel: Words by Mother and Daughter

Barbara Rothstein · Thursday, May 9th, 2013

In honor of Mother's Day, four poems by mother and daughter, Barbara Rothstein and Carolyn Ziel.

You'll Always Be My Baby

by Barbara Rothstein

It was Sunday. Carolyn arrived at 9:06 a.m.
I had given birth to a beautiful, healthy, baby girl.
At first, as I held her in my arms, I felt relief, an overpowering love,
a primal connection; she was part of me.
And then I felt the smothering responsibility that was now mine.
I began to sob.
The flowers came just at that moment.
"You'll always be my baby," the card said. "Love, Mother."
How could she know? I wondered.
How could she know that I felt so like a baby?
So small ...
So overwhelmed...
So like I needed my mommy.
How could she know?
But of course.
She always knew.
She was the maven of mixed emotions.

Never Too Late For Love

by Barbara Rothstein

Sometimes in the first light of morning
I wake to memories, floating through my mind like stardust,
little fireflies that catch my attention.
I would see my mother, her controlling, fearful self, insecurities hidden
behind a firmly transplanted persona; her graciousness

derived from years of practice.

She could never say no easily to anyone outside the family.

And I could never say no easily to her.

There was always the possibility of the slap across the face, the pinch of an ear. The threat, "Don't come home!" if I were to disobey her.

For years, I remembered her that way. Resented, judged, blamed her for my shortcomings, my fears.

She was "Sylvia," the neighborhood's beloved corsetiere, sculpting the voluptuous and the flat-chested, hiding potbellies, hips and bulging thighs.

She was always on, always available.

She had little patience left for me.

But memories change.

I remember her differently now.

"I was so mean to you when you were a teenager," she said to me, fifty years later.

It was a few months before she died.

"I never gave you a chance to make a mistake when you helped out in the store."

It was true. I could still see her glaring at me,

her jaw jutting out if I was unsure,

making change for a customer at the register.

It was an apology, a long-dreamed of golden moment.

But that day it wasn't satisfaction I felt.

That day, I felt only love.

I didn't need her acknowledgement anymore.

I only needed to say, "Thank you, Mom. You were still a terrific mother."

That's how I remember her now.

There are some people you never love well enough while they're here.

But it's never too late to love them more.

A Black and White Picture

by Carolyn Ziel

I have a picture of us,

me and my mother.

She is younger than I am now.

In the picture I am five or six or four.

She is thirty-one, thirty-two, or thirty.

I'm reaching up to kiss her cheek,

soft and ripe with youth.

We both have curly hair.

Our eyes are bright.

There are so many times,

moments, to follow

that black and white picture.

Birthdays, holidays, graduations,

weddings and funerals,

a trip to San Francisco after

my father died

and my mother

walking me down
the aisle.
They used thinner paper, with
scalloped edges back then,
in the 60's,
to develop photographs.
We are preserved
in this frame
with the corners bent
from wear.
I wonder how many fingers
have touched this tick.
I try not to think about
the time when she will leave.
I'll pick up the phone
to call her
say hello
static will answer back—
the clicking of a dead line.
Now when I kiss her cheek
I have to bend a bit.
There is still light
in her green eyes and
her cheek is soft
sanded down with time.
She has said goodbye
to many:
her mom
her dad
her cousins
her aunts, nieces, nephews,
her husband.
I know one day
she'll say goodbye to me,
but I can't think about that now.
Instead I open the door to
let in the April breeze;
it kisses my cheek
which
grows softer with time.

Go To Mom

by Carolyn Ziel

My mom
was the go-to mom
she gave the neighborhood kids
all the extra love

they needed.
Some needed it and
didn't even know it,
until they were older
and their lives
were full with
too much drinking
too much sex
too much self-doubt.
My mom was the go-to mom
In gatherings around
Our kitchen table
Counseling my girl friends on
why he might not be that good of a choice,
why he isn't calling back,
why they shouldn't hold on so tight.
-let go, let them come to you-
she would say.
My mom was the go-to mom
with a secret trip to the
police station to
pick up a neighbor's boy
who, at 21, drank and got
himself on the wrong side
of the law.
He couldn't call his mom.
My mom was the go-to mom
when she comforted the eighteen year old at the clinic,
whose first experience
was a lie.
She thought he was wearing a condom.
My mom is my go-to mom.
I can call her crying after fighting with a friend,
call her with good news or bad,
call her just because.

*Cultural Weekly is proud to premiere these poems in this edition.
In the top photo, daughter Carolyn is on left, mother Barbara is on right.*

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