

THE GRAVE-MERRY GIRLS

Amy Alznauer

1st Place, Annie Dillard Award for Creative Nonfiction

*... and in a vision, I have seen, my brothers
playing on the green. —Edwin Muir*

D

I.

etachment comes easy to a child, as easy as breath. A monk tries his whole long life to desire only eternity, but a child, hands down and without effort, is less attached to the world. She would give it all up for a little song and dance.

When I was eight I hauled my Huffy three-speed to the top of our street, a long hill that dipped between the houses like the handle of a spoon, emptying at the bottom into a cul-de-sac. For days I had watched the neighborhood kids sailing down on their parents' bikes, their skinny arms leaning out for the wide bars and their legs, not content with the pull of gravity, rushing the wheels. Oh, I could imagine it, the great whir of it. I could see it in the way a girl's hair got caught up by the wind, flapping behind her like the tails of a banner, like a fin. And her body was so much a part of the bike that everything seemed drawn in spokes, lean and spinning. For days I had pictured myself in her form, bent low by the draft and flying.

I hauled my bike up and straddled it at the hill's crest, my leg cocked against the pavement like a kickstand. Looking down the steep drag, I could feel it already, a lightness shimmying up my limbs, a tensing in my back and stomach, everything taut and poised for flight. It was so easy to imagine the lift-off and then catching the breeze. No wonder so many men, pining for the air, fashioned their arms with feathers and jumped off cliffs.

Then, with no more thought than it takes to flip a coin, I pushed my foot against the blacktop, shifted it to a pedal, and was off. At first the bike jerked side to side as I churned the gears, trying to copy those hammering legs, revving as much speed as I could into the wheels. But soon my knees couldn't rise and fall fast enough, and I let the hill take me, dipping me down its long handle.

And this is how it must have gone for the others, the stages of loss. First the houses clicking by like squares of ticker tape and the trees bars on a merry-go-round. But then faster, the houses smudging into a blur taking the trees with them in a line of color, and the patches of lawn once broken up by driveways, now stretching into a long skid of green. The sense of disappearing into this blur, until so much in it, I could no longer make out anything, only what must have been the air rushing, buffeted and brushed, against my face.

I let my hands let go the bars and arms lift like wings. I let the world pass like dust, sifting through my fingers. I let life pour itself into single current, a single rapid glide. One scream of life, one *Gloria* and you're done.

For days I had pictured this sweep, but never its end. Never what happens when you reach the curb, the way the front tire rears, and your hands jam back to the bars, the jagged course up someone else's drive, all the speed shaken out into jolts and jumps. Maybe had I known I could have eased up the bike, slowed it to a stop in the cul-de-sac, propping my leg once again on the ground. Maybe had I pictured the garage door waiting, whitewashed and broad, to stop my body as it pitched off the banana seat, I would have sat down and planned it out ahead of time. But even now, I can't remember any pain that day. Maybe I blacked out or cried. Maybe I finally picked myself up, bleeding and bruised, and pushed my bike across the street to my house. But all that remains in memory is the sensation of flight and that quick, sudden descent.

It appalls me, when I think of it now, how carelessly I took off down the hill, with no more concern for the curb or the door, than for death itself. I struck out for the sake of an abstraction, for my own idea of flight, which I'd conjured from my bedroom window. Like all children, I prized a good theory over the fact of a door. I would have flown off the hill's handle and sailed out of this life without checking my course, without looking back.

My sister too, as soon as she could walk, used to head out alone with only a distant glimmer in mind. Out my bedroom window was the cul-de-sac and, beyond the cul-de-sac, where the street would have gone had it continued, an open green, acres and acres of common grass in the middle of a neighborhood. On the far side of this park, a roadside motel stood behind a line of trees. Once, for a change of pace, my mother took us there to explore, and there my sister fixed on the stairs.

They rose out of the ground and led upwards to nowhere it seemed, to the sky. She ran to them and knelt on the first slab, studying the planks, each one separated from the next by an open space. Crusted with pebbles and chips of quartz, each step caught the sun in a different pattern of light, the chips firing like so many sparks.

After that day she ached for the stairs. What form might they have taken in her mind? Did she imagine their height or glitter or uncertain end? It must have been weeks later, the stairs now only a mere hypothesis, that she set out unnoticed across the green. Alone, running full tilt, she pounded the wet grass with her sneakers, no thought for the road she would have to cross, or the distance she opened behind her, or even whether she knew the course. She must have made it half-way there before our mother started trailing her.

I can picture them: My sister in the lead like a runaway, forsaking the world, and our mother following, darting like a spy behind trees and benches. A girl ready to toss her life for a glimpse of that spangled climb, and a woman behind, bringing with her all the care for this world the girl lacked. Human culture dogging an outlaw. Love on the heels of a scout.

But even as we were so ready to run, lickety-split, out of this life, my sister and I kept a fierce intimacy. How to make sense of this now? Two sprites, fickle and merry, dancing with one foot in, one foot out of the world, but nevertheless seeking each other out, joining up, again and again, on the green. From the most distant reach of memory comes, like little fragments of silent film, clips of us together. The reel spins in my mind, flapping its tail of film in a circle, until the feed catches. The screen is white. I make bad shadow puppets. A rabbit. Abe Lincoln. A shoe. Then, there we are, running around in a little yellow room. The room seems flooded with light because it's dark outside and the windowpanes turn the brightness back. Light upon light. And still we

are running, over a pallet of pillows and blankets piled up on the floor. We collapse on our backs, dizzy, our arms and legs crisscrossing, our hair in a mess of light and dark strands. The white screen flashes. We are sitting in the same room, combing each other's hair with our fingers. Our mouths are moving continuously. We chatter on the silent screen, chatter and comb as the reel peters out.

And even if those clips of intimacy are exaggerated by nostalgia, I have one piece of clear evidence, a word that survives to this day from our pre-history, that proves our early bond. *Ung*, she still calls me. *Ung*, I call her back. We use the same name for each other but can't remember making it up. Like a Saxon root or a chip of bone, this name is a clue to the past, a little awl for untying knots.

Johann Gottfried Herder believed we have language lying in our souls. As soon as we can call ourselves human, words have occurred to us. He imagines it like this: A sheep comes along, white and gentle, nibbling on this and that, and bleating. It leaves and then comes again. Again it bears its white body, chomps a bit on our sleeve, and bleating goes. Maybe on the third time round, the sheep ambling up again, our soul silently bleats in recognition, and a word is born in our breast. No matter if we think to give it air, or attach to it a particular set of pen strokes, the word is already present in our thoughts. Whether we are hermits or mutes or babbling fools, language lives in us, coeval with our minds.

In what private room, in what yellow light, did my sister and I come together for the hundredth or thousandth time, and notice that we were alone together, that together we made something up, a unit? Before coining a name, there must have been a day when we noticed this, that the two of us together were a thing, like a sheep is a thing. And then, inside each of us, something akin to bleating must have sounded. Maybe that same day, or maybe much later, one of us named this word out loud. *Ung*, one of us said for the first time.

Unlike a birth name which is callously kept no matter who lives or dies, *Ung* implies the presence of two. In dreams, if my sister dies, always I hear, bleating and breaking my heart, our samename. With one of us gone, the name becomes a title for the grave, for something that once was but is no longer. Tied up in the name is the recognition of a living relationship.

But back then I doubt we understood the fragility of our name. If

we did, how could we have parted so often and so easily? Is that what is meant when we are told to become again like children, that we must peer back into those early years to see how it was once possible to turn away from one another? Or is it that we never should have turned in the first place to see love trailing us, steady and sure across the green, calling us back?

II.

We grew up in a ranch house shaped like an L. The foot of the L ran parallel to the street, heading up the hill. The L's mast pointed straight at the street. My bedroom and its window were at the tip of the mast, looking out on the cul-de-sac. My sister's room, right behind mine but farther back on the mast, looked out on a bit of lawn cornered by the L. Bright and pink and aimed at the street, my room was open to the neighborhood. Shaded by a crabapple, her room was shadowed and blue, interior to the house.

At the base of the hill and end of the block, our house stood between two worlds – the neighborhood stretching up the hill on one side, and on the other, the open green. Summer days we would slip out the back door and immediately be in the park. At the end of the park closest to our house was a stone turtle, a set of swings, and a sliding board. We ran to the swings each day, ignorant of time. The sun, lobbed high and forgotten, kept the hours long. But even still the nights came swift, closing the park off with darkness. And we were young and went to bed soon after dark, parting finally at the end of the hall, she to the right and I straight ahead.

Each night the catch clicked and I was alone. I stood in the great hush of my room. Far down the mast the hull of the house still filled with light and distant murmurings. But out here at the tip, cast into the sighing dark, only my room and I in it seemed fully real. I lay on my bed beneath the window with the space of the room around me. My desk and cabinets stood quietly against the wall. *Shhhhhh*, everything seemed to be saying, keen and still, full of my life. The flowered curtains above my head were back-lit by the street-lamp, the centers of the daisies glowing white like so many moons. I knelt on the bed and ducked under the curtain, letting its moons fall about me like a veil. Propping my arms on the sill, I pressed my nose into the screen and smelled its dust and

weather. The cul-de-sac pooled with white from the street-lamp and looked like a stage, already lit and waiting. Perched here, I was almost outside, but just shy of open night.

Beyond the silence of my room the mid-summer air shivered with crickets. Once, I heard beneath the shiver a low rush, a fast turning all down the hill. *Shhhhhh*, the room kept saying. *Shhhhhh*, the hill answered back. I scrunched lower down in the window. And then one by one I saw them appear, whirring down on their skateboards, rolling out onto the empty stage. I held my breath, my heart thrumming with the crickets in my ears. They drew up dead center. Each boy set one foot on the circle and with the other sent his board knocking to the curb. The six boards bumped to a stop, clustered at the rim of the cul-de-sac like docked boats. At the tip of the mast, I could still hear, from far below, the murmuring house lapping. But all around me, nothing moved, as if a hidden drape had lifted and made of a chance crowd an audience. I willed the room and curtains and screen keep steady and the crickets sing.

One boy had a glass jug, which he held high and tipped till something splashed down on his feet. They passed the jug around, tipping and splashing, their voices flaring up with jeers. Then, in a chorus of struck matches they touched the flints to their doused feet, ignited their shoes, and began to dance. Out my window, instead of boys, now a dervish whirled. I trembled in the riggings of my watch, breathless. The stage, once flat and lonesome, leapt with flames; like angels they ringed its circle round with sparks. Orange darted in blooms and fits behind each step, and the night became a pageant. I yearned to join in, follow them into the dark, with my own feet gold and stamping.

But as quick as they sprang the fires died, and the last sparks scattered to the brink. The boys broke the glass jug, undocked their boards, and each headed back up the hill with one foot down and one foot rowing against the blacktop. For a long time I stared at the circle of white, absent now of the magic boys, but still bright with mystery. I stared until I must have laid back down and slept.

Morning came, and everything was coated with light, made common again by the sun. I was already in it, outside and running toward the swings. And she was there too, again beside me. We ran together. Just hours ago, I sat alone in my window, wishing I could step out into the blaze and go off with the troupe of boys, but now I said nothing. I must

have seen, over the sliding board and the stone turtle, the shards of glass glinting at me from the street, recalling the night, but I just pulled on the chains of my swing and raced my sister to the sky. Did it make me sad to be near her again when I had so recently imagined leaving? Did my thoughts turn to glory, and then to her, turn and turn, until I didn't know which way to look?

But these are questions I am asking now. Now I can look back and see two girls, crisscrossing in the air, two points reaching the heights of their arcs and falling, meeting mid-sail and missing, heading out again to pause at opposite tips. I see one, then the other, rush by. And moving away, I see the wide sweep, where they were at the upper end of the green, under the metal frame of the swings, and the turtle standing by, their house right there at the base of the hill's spoon, and the sun, above it all, promising to stay put. Then, up close again, I watch them both, moving back and forth, and can imagine my way into to either life. Closer still, and I am in darkness. The stories my sister has since told me, in the decades between then and now, move in with me and make the darkness into a room. They fill the room with a girl and brush the lines of a crabapple across the wall.

The room is blue and silent, the silence still fresh from a recently closed door, its click on the air. The girl walks through the hush to her bed and lies down on her back. In the distance crickets mark the far edge of her awareness. She is imagining that the room is a cell and her white nightgown, a postulant's robes. She looks through the window at the only bit of world she will ever see, a plot of lawn and a crabapple. She looks at the opposite wall where this same bit of world is traced in shadow. On her chest, under her hands pressed together in prayer, is a miracle: a book about life in the cloister. *I Leap Over the Wall* it says down its spine. Earlier today, though the title wasn't listed in the library's card catalogue, she had searched the stacks. So when she found it for ten cents on the library's table of used books, she knew God must be calling her. Now, she holds the book and imagines how it would be to leap out of her life, suddenly light and borne up like dust, over the wall, to land here in her cell, weighted, never to leap back. And she would lie, she thinks, just like she is now—still, with only the shadows of the world near by and the weight of miracle on her chest—and wait for God to come. Perhaps she hears a whirring in the distance, something spinning down from the heights. God, she thinks. And will He fill her

room with brightness, burst in and burn, turn the shadowed limbs to lights? Will He dance about the room with angels, and she never leave? And then, does she see it? God in the street, flames just in the distance, visible from the edge of her window.

And I see it too, glory burning beside each window, and the two windows on the tip and side of a mast, the mast part of a house, and the house in a neighborhood, hidden with its hill and its green by the night. And later, morning coming on. The doors opening. Two girls heading out into the sun.

But back then, I could only see myself alone and us together. I never imagined that there beside me, in the skin of my sister, was another being like me, who sat nights transfixed before a different window. Back then, unknowing, sitting in the plastic curve of my own seat, I just leaned my weight back, bent the long chains and sailed, my bare toes pointed, trying to reach past hers.

III.

When does sadness come? When, between then and now, does it become impossible to be wholly alone, or wholly together? When does each place become shadowed by the other? At some point, when alone, we begin to feel the tug of the world, drawing us; and at some point, even when together, we begin to notice the fact of our solitude, still present and insuperable. We worry that by turning to the heavens, we will lose the world; or, that by turning to each other, we will lose eternity. Each way we turn something is lost, and, whether facing this way or that, turning and turning, our hearts still break.

The theologian Hugo Rahner imagined that the ideal life is one lived in the manner of what the Greeks called *an-r-spoudogeloios*, or the grave-merry man. "Such a man is," he writes, "always two men in one: he is a man with an easy gaiety of spirit, one might almost say a man of spiritual elegance...but he is also a man of tragedy, a man of laughter and tears." Poised between heaven and earth, he is at once joyful and grave, comic and tragic. He loves the world, but never too much. Is such a life possible? Is that how my sister and I once were? Grave-merry girls, turning so nimbly from the sky to the ground and back again, finding each other and parting, over and over, as if in a dance?

I picture us, me flying off the hill, her heading out across the green,

and then us together, with our hands in each other's hair. I see us in separate rooms, each solitude unbroken by the other, and then, as if we were never apart, together again on the swings. No, in turning so effortlessly between a private and a shared realm, we only gave the look of a grave-merry life. We took on its surface and shape. I see in us, only the guise of such a life, but not its heart or its challenge, for back then we never imagined what could be lost in the turning; we never imagined we were turning at all.

I think it comes slowly. The sadness breaks over you like time, like the turning of a day you would have sworn was standing still. But later, you recall this turning, like a time-lapse film, some slow process—a blade of grass getting tall, a cirrus evaporating—happening in a flash. You look back and see yourself in the tops of a willow, its three branches split and bowed into a chair. You know that you were there, in that same position countless times, leaning against the sturdiest limb, your two legs dangling through the leaves, dangling lower and lower over the years. Looking back, you see this cascade of nights, overlaid and blended into one. What must have unfolded or fallen or changed over the years, takes place in the span of a single night. You are high above the world, palmed up by a tree into the stars, so high you can barely remember what it was like to live on the earth, or if you ever did. Everything is cool and clear and still. Empty. But then, as if being lifted up through water, you realize suddenly that you are immersed in a presence, surrounded. The night is brushing its hands across your face. You look up at the sky, and then, for no reason, down at the ground. Where is she, you think. Did your sister tire of looking for you and go inside? How long ago? You don't remember hearing the screen door slam.

You look up at the stars, and the night has drawn its hands back. It seems to you then, that all the world has died, and you are there, propped on a jut of bark, with only God spread out against the shattered dark.

You picture your sister in her own room, looking up at her ceiling of glow-in-the-dark constellations. Is she really there, you wonder, or gone forever? The stars above you seem terribly far away, pricked and quivering in the black. You wish desperately now that you had called out to her instead of hiding in the willow.

And then another image occurs to you: The two of you together, on another night, in the back of a car. You are lying in your sister's lap—it

is your turn to lie down—looking up at her. The night leans close against the windows of the car, and the sound of the road muffles your parents' voices. Her hair falls down around your head, forming a little cage. She is pushing your eyebrows in the wrong directions, twisting your bangs into a single curl, then drawing the strands of your hair long, examining the ends, all the while chattering on. *Ung*, she calls you as she weaves your hair through her fingers, trying to make Jacob's ladder.

You imagine lying there in the den of her hair. But you know, if you were there again, you would be thinking, even as she braided your hair, of the shattered dark above you now. You wouldn't be able to stop yourself from remembering how it was to sit alone in the sky on these split limbs. You would realize that you could never fully share this other night with her, and that she too is sometimes beyond reach.

These two nights—both, in reality, many nights—begin to haunt each other. The stars against the window lapse into the stars above the willow. The hands of the night lapse into the hands of your sister. And you can't remember quite what it was like to be free of this haunting. Once you could fly and let the world pass like dust. Now, you are sure, if you were coasting down that hill and saw in the distance your sister running in the park, you would stop flying and ride. The bike would become your tool; you would pedal towards her, bound and intentional. You would turn her around to see your mother coming across the green. You would hear, and make her hear, love calling you back.
