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Old Girls

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The Old Girls

Mary Dengler

The old girls are coming round,
faces chiseled like a Rushmore stone,
eyes direct as head lights, shining straight ahead, bold
bodies spare and hard as flint
or roomy for the lives they've carried. One
I called, the other calling me from years of silence,
voices like the gravel on a country road.

The one in Denver said she'd lived "from hand to mouth,"
her pun on tough negotiations of a marriage pact
in tee-pee, homeless shelter, flat-bed truck
and boat with drugs and men
and children that she bore without a Chair
or Ph.D. behind her name,
culling life's supplies from rough terrain.

Although she flew beyond the rest
in seizing theory, form and philosophic truth,
these didn't seize her hard as one
whose brutal madness matched her wit
and broke her boyish grace.
She left before the end of senior year
to face a harsh disease of love and bear
her first, a still-born son.

She'd fled the side of colleagues, dominee, and home to dance
with every devil known. Containing fires
of her domestic strife,
she let her coming children glean the wisdom
from her sordid life, her gifted mind
more often on the run,
and gave from Goodwill
and garage sale college texts
an education that eclipsed
the outlined syllabus or guide.

When God appeared with her in fume and fire,
she followed him from mountain heights to desert,
pitching tents to keep her children warm and dry,
then led them into Denver,
barring television, school, and social rites.

I lacked the courage," she once said,
"to live an academic life." She let
the batterings of hand to mouth

complete her deficits of worth instead,
then with wit's alchemy transformed
her cowardice to strength and hate to love
in children she had birthed.

Twice married and divorced, she laughs without the Camel
held by three stained fingers of her former years
and looks ahead like Lady Moses, Joan of Arc,
if Joan had lost her faith and lived to get it back.
"I work to sell electric trains and read at night
to grandkids, tend my plants."

Transcending works of Hardy, Lawrence, Joyce,
she walks off past the city lights to Xavier Street,
a saint in her own rights.

The other, calling me from San Francisco Bay,
had lived as student, writer, with degrees
in English, later law, learning early
men were human in their mortal flaw,
no different from Achilles when he couldn't have his way,
Odysseus under Kirke's or Kalypso's charms,
depending on Athena as his shield,
or Paris when the thought of Helen made him leave his wife,
or Jason leaving Dido and Medea
for a fresher field.

A high school friend,
with cat eyes green as gulf coast seas,
she'd borne me up above the reefs
of fashion, noise, and imitated pose.
Instead we'd talked of Plato, Golding, Salinger, and God,
of e e cumings' poetry and Orwell's prose,
of Waiting for Godot in reverent awe,
of extentialism, interracial marriage,
immigration law, and truths unearthed in hell
called Vietnam
in smoke-filled coffee houses half the night
while other high school friends
avoided questions of the soul with Jagger, Rolling Rock
and muscatel.

She'd sailed through Lawrence College,
floundering on a psychopathic boy she'd sworn to love
at any cost, which mounted in her final year.
But when he stole her heart with all the rest, she set a course
as freelance writer on the coast. She too had met a host
of devils dressed as drugs and men
who danced her hard in their dark forests
till the Law appeared in fire and fume
and gave the Order for her life.

Attorney now, she chants the language of the law—
its power—to free her clients from enchanted caves,
reward them for their pain
as former slaves to love.

Eschewing men as guardians of her fate,
she clings to one of her own gender for her mate in worth, and looks
as God as mystic mother of the earth, benign,
absorbing all at last,
and spends her free time
in research, teaching, writing books.

“And are you really married, do you hold
the faith you trusted as a girl?”
“I am, I do,” I said direct as I
am old.
“I can't believe it...want to get together now, so much to ask.”
“I'm ready soon as one of us can get away.”
And Sapho-like we praise each other as the saviors
of our younger years.

The old girls are coming round from their long quest,
a hardy lively crew,
the latter cynical, the former always new,
but both the strongest that I've ever known,
or, without knowing, ever knew.