

Gap Year by Jackie Kay

(for Mateo)

I

1. I remember your Moses basket before you were born.
I'd stare at the fleecy white sheet for days, weeks,
willing you to arrive, hardly able to believe
I would ever have a real baby to put in the basket.

2. I'd feel the mound of my tight tub of a stomach,
and you moving there, foot against my heart,
elbow in my ribcage, turning, burping, awake, asleep.
One time I imagined I felt you laugh.

3. I'd play you Handel's Water Music or Emma Kirkby
singing Pergolesi. I'd talk to you, my close stranger,
call you Tumshie, ask when you were coming to meet me.
You arrived late, the very hot summer of eighty-eight.

4. You had passed the due date string of eights,
and were pulled out with forceps, blue, floury,
on the fourteenth of August on Sunday afternoon.
I took you home on Monday and lay you in your basket.

II

5. Now, I peek in your room and stare at your bed
hardly able to imagine you back in there sleeping,
Your handsome face – soft, open. Now you are eighteen,
six foot two, away, away in Costa Rica, Peru, Bolivia.

6. I follow your trails on my Times Atlas:
from the Caribbean side of Costa Rica to the Pacific,
the baby turtles to the massive leatherbacks.
Then on to Lima, to Cuzco. Your grandfather

7. rings: ‘Have you considered altitude sickness,
Christ, he’s sixteen thousand feet above sea level.’
Then to the lost city of the Incas, Macchu Picchu,
Where you take a photograph of yourself with the statue

8. of the original Tupac. You are wearing a Peruvian hat.
Yesterday in Puno before catching the bus for Copacabana,
you suddenly appear on a webcam and blow me a kiss,
you have a new haircut; your face is grainy, blurry.

9. Seeing you, shy, smiling, on the webcam reminds me
of the second scan at twenty weeks, how at that fuzzy
moment back then, you were lying cross-legged with
an index finger resting sophisticatedly on one cheek.

10. You started the Inca trail in Arctic conditions
and ended up in subtropical. Now you plan the Amazon
in Bolivia. Your grandfather rings again to say
‘There’s three warring factions in Bolivia, warn him

11. against it. He canny see everything. Tell him to come home.’
But you say all the travellers you meet rave about Bolivia. You
want to see the Salar de Uyuni,
the world’s largest salt-flats, the Amazonian rainforest.
12. And now you are not coming home till four weeks after
your due date. After Bolivia, you plan to stay
with a friend’s Auntie in Argentina.
Then – to Chile where you’ll stay with friends of Diane’s.
13. And maybe work for the Victor Jara Foundation.
I feel like a home-alone mother; all the lights
have gone out in the hall, and now I am
wearing your large black slippers, flip-flopping
14. into your empty bedroom, trying to imagine you
in your bed. I stare at the photos you send by messenger:
you on the top of the world, arms outstretched, eager.
Blue sky, white snow; you by Lake Tararhua, beaming.
15. My heart soars like the birds in your bright blue skies.
My love glows like the sunrise over the lost city.
I sing along to Ella Fitzgerald, A tisket A tasket.
I have a son out in the big wide world.
16. A flip and a skip ago, you were dreaming in your basket.

Keeping Orchids by Jackie Kay

The orchids my mother gave me when we first met
are still alive, twelve days later. Although

some of the buds remain closed as secrets.

Twice since I carried them back, like a baby in a shawl,

from her train station to mine, then home. Twice
since then the whole glass carafe has crashed

falling over, unprovoked, soaking my chest of drawers.

All the broken waters. I have rearranged

the upset orchids with troubled hands. Even after
that the closed ones did not open out. The skin

shut like an eye in the dark; the closed lid.

Twelve days later, my mother's hands are all I have.

Her voice is fading fast. Even her voice rushes
through a tunnel the other way from home.

I close my eyes and try to remember exactly:
a paisley pattern scarf, a brooch, a navy coat.

A digital watch her daughter was wearing when she died.

Now they hang their heads,

and suddenly grow old – the proof of meeting. Still,
her hands, awkward and hard to hold

fold and unfold a green carrier bag as she tells
the story of her life. Compressed. Airtight.

A sad square, then a crumpled shape. A bag of tricks.
Her secret life – a hidden album, a box of love letters.

A door opens and closes. Time is outside waiting.
I catch the draught in my winter room.

Airlocks keep the cold air out.

Boiling water makes flowers live longer. So does

cutting the stems with a sharp knife.

Lucozade by Jackie Kay

1. My mum is on a high bed next to sad chrysanthemums.
'Don't bring flowers, they only wilt and die.'
I am scared my mum is going to die
on the bed next to the sad chrysanthemums.
2. She nods off and her eyes go back in her head.
Next to her bed is a bottle of Lucozade.
'Orange nostalgia, that's what that is,' she says. '
Don't bring Lucozade either,' then fades.
3. 'The whole day was a blur, a swarm of eyes.
Those doctors with their white lies.
Did you think you could cheer me up with a Woman's Own?
Don't bring magazines, too much about size.'
4. My mum wakes up, groggy and low.
'What I want to know,' she says, 'is this:
where's the big brandy, the generous gin, the Bloody Mary,
the biscuit tin, the chocolate gingers, the dirty big meringue?'

5. I am sixteen; I've never tasted a Bloody Mary.
'Tell your father to bring a luxury,' says she.
'Grapes have no imagination, they're just green.
Tell him: stop the neighbours coming.'

7. I clear her cupboard in Ward 10B, Stobhill Hospital.
I leave, bags full, Lucozade, grapes, oranges,
sad chrysanthemums under my arms,
weighted down. I turn round, wave with her flowers.

8. My mother, on her high hospital bed, waves back.
Her face is light and radiant, dandelion hours.
Her sheets billow and whirl. She is beautiful.
Next to her the empty table is divine.

9. I carry the orange nostalgia home singing an old song.

My Grandmother's Houses by Jackie Kay

1

She is on the second floor of a tenement.

From her front room window you see the cemetery.

Her bedroom is my favourite: newspapers
dating back to the War covering every present
she's ever got since the War. What's the point
in buying her anything my mother moans.

Does she use it. Does she even look at it.

I spend hours unwrapping and wrapping endless
tablecloths, napkins, perfume, bath salts,
stories of things I can't understand, words
like conscientious objector. At night I climb
over all the newspaper parcels to get to bed,
harder than the school's obstacle course. High up
in her bed all the print merges together.

When she gets the letter she is hopping mad.

What does she want with anything modern,
a shiny new pin? Here is home.

The sideboard solid as a coffin.

The newsagents next door which sells
hazelnut toffees and her Daily Record.

Chewing for ages over the front page,
her toffees sticking to her false teeth.

2

The new house is called a high rise.
I play in the lift all the way up to 24.
Once I get stuck for a whole hour.
From her window you see noisy kids
playing hopscotch or home.
She makes endless pots of vegetable soup,
a bit bit of hoch floating inside like a fish.

Till finally she gets to like the hot
running water in her own bathroom,
the wall-to-wall foam-backed carpet,
the parcels locked in her air-raid shelter.
But she still doesn't settle down;
even at 70 she cleans people's houses
for ten bob and goes to church on Sundays,
dragging me along to the strange place where the air
is trapped and ghosts sit at the altar.
My parents do not believe. It is down to her.
A couple of prayers. A hymn or two.
Threepenny bit in the collection hat.
A flock of women in coats and fussy hats
flapping over me like missionaries, and that is that,
until the next time God grabs me in Glasgow with Gran.

3

By the time I am seven we are almost the same height.
She still walks faster, rushing me down the High Street
till we get to her cleaning house. The hall is huge.
Rooms lead off like an octopus's arms.

I sit in a room with a grand piano, top open –
a one-winged creature, whilst my gran polishes
for hours. Finally bored I start to pick some notes,
oh can you wash a sailor's shirt oh can you wash and clean
till my gran comes running, duster in hand.

I told you don't touch anything. The woman comes too;
the posh one all smiles that make goosepimples
run up my arms. Would you like to sing me a song?
Someone's crying my Lord Kumbaya. Lovely, she says,
beautiful child, skin the colour of café au lait.

'Café oh what? Hope she's not being any bother.'

Not at all. Not at all. You just get back to your work.

On the way to her high rise I see her
like the hunchback of Notre Dame. Everytime I crouch
over a comic she slaps me. Sit up straight.

She is on the ground floor of a high rise.

From her living-room you see ambulances,
screaming their way to the Royal Infirmary.

Old Tongue

When I was eight, I was forced south.

Not long after, when I opened
my mouth, a strange thing happened.

I lost my Scottish accent.

Words fell off my tongue:

eedyit, dreich, wabbit, crabbit

stummer, teuchter, heidbanger,

so you are, so am ur, see you, see ma ma,

shut yer geggie or I'll gie you the malkie!

My own vowels started to stretch like my bones
and I turned my back on Scotland.

Words disappeared in the dead of night,
new words marched in: ghastly, awful,
quite dreadful, *scones* said like *stones*.

Pokey hats into ice cream cones.

Oh where did all my words go –
my old words, my lost words?

Did you ever feel sad when you lost a word,
did you ever try and call it back
like calling in the sea?

If I could have found my words wandering,
I swear I would have taken them in,
swallowed them whole, knocked them back.

Out in the English soil, my old words
buried themselves. It made my mother's blood boil.
I cried one day with the wrong sound in my mouth.
I wanted them back; I wanted my old accent back,
my old tongue. My dour Scottish tongue.
Sing-songy. I wanted to *gie it laldie*.

Whilst Leila Sleeps

I am moving in the dead of night,
packing things, turning out lights.
My fingers tie knots like fish nets.
I want to be in my mother's house
but she is all the way over

the other side of the world. Boxes;
I can't see out of the back window.
Leila is a bundle in her car seat.
Her small mouth hanging open.
Maybe it is not innocence after all,

it could be the sleep of oblivion.
My headlights are paranoid eyes
sweeping the streets for – what?
A split second before they appeared
I thought I was safe. What is that fear.

Does it have a name. They want my name.
Their smiles tighten my stomach.
I bite on my tongue, hard. Their faces.
I have no witness. They take my licence,
my papers. Now there is nothing left

but to go with the men in plain suits.
Leila stirs and opens her eyes wide.
I try and say something to soothe.
My voice is a house with the roof
blown off. What do I tell my daughter –

We are done for. There is a need to worry.
I cannot lie to her. The night dreams
my terror; a slow light tails the fast car;
Leila tugs at my coat. I whisper
her cradle song and she holds on.