



Absence of Wings

poems

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*For A., and for her mother and her sister,
and for all the world's defenceless children*

In 1985 my sister adopted A., an eight-year-old child from Brazil, her new daughter. I became her new daughter's aunt, her only aunt. And I became her mother's main—maybe her only—confidant. *Absence of Wings* bears witness to A.'s story, partial and partially fictionized, and to the profound effect her life had on the small family around her. She was one child in a world of so many. The time we had with her opened the world to us.

1.

She Arrives Wearing a Wide Purple Coat

the angels have no wings / they come to you wearing / their own clothes

Lucille Clifton

The scent of snow this day is laced
with lemon with leaving layered
somewhere between lonely and love
in the breathtaking air between airport and car
her spiralled arrival

and for A. who has never known the cold
snow smells like confusion like nothing at all hollow
a billow at the back of the throat
April is the month the 13th and yet snow
still falls loosely falling apart
an undersong the last notes of winter folding into the first notes of spring

she arrives wearing a wide purple coat felted wool with a belt
and a tricoloured toque mauve magenta maroon
in the car the hat stays on her head

plus there is this dog small enough but still a dog
on the back seat where A. and the dog must ride side by side
fur-feathered-gold but under its lips teeth
she knows about teeth in Brazil there are dogs that will kill you
ask anyone in São Paulo those dogs will eat you tear you apart

so A. sits tight against the car door eyes angled right
watching out the back window into the white avoiding
the sight of the furred lump with two ears
that could bite her kill her
though its head now lies on its paws

I could call this mythology authentic in part
as mythology sometimes begins in partial truth
wherein an original small human being
grows through tribulation into a god a goddess
the god of endurance let's say
or the god of a very big smile

I'm only her aunt her new mother's sister
my sister and I talk all the time on the phone
which makes me the long-distant long-time
confidant emotional witness

and this is simply a story
of fortitude partially very partially true
mythopoeic wherever needed places I couldn't places
I could only imagine

I know so much
I know so little

The New Mother's Big Sister (a.k.a. the aunt)

I became A.'s new aunt when I saw the small headshot the orphanage has sent to my sister it began then or maybe I didn't see the photo at all maybe my sister simply described A.'s eight-year-old face to me over the phone as she read me the written description hyperactive or maybe they said overactive so much of this story happened over the phone and so long ago

I said find out what they mean by overactive does she fight does she bite I worked in mental health at the time I knew the codes what could be buried in a word like overactive I don't remember what my sister said she wasn't concerned and I was wrong I didn't understand that once A. her picture once my sister had seen her in the small three-by-five she was smitten no thought no wish to turn back A. was smiling and she needed a home my sister knew she was perfect she knew they were destined

and I was thinking only of my sister younger hold her hand my mother told me keep her safe bring her home my sister was thinking only of A.

in this story I am not even an *eyewitness*
I am an ear at the end of the line
an aunt three thousand miles to the west copper cables fibre optics
laid along highways and waterways
across farmlands and fields over and under

our twice-weekly words
worlds
we catch up on the phone
hours
all she can say and all she can't say
that private that much to protect

I learn
without seeing it takes years of reflection
she day-to-days it in her Ottawa kitchen
in the changeable eye

The New Aunt (a.k.a. the author)

My sister returns from Brazil the 13th of April and here on the West Coast the day is blue and filled with pink blossoms and with the news that my sister my younger sister has returned to Ottawa with her new eight-year-old daughter safe

When I was five my mother would tell me to take my sister's hand that tiny five-fingered star when we'd cross Lakeshore Boulevard hold her hand my mother would say and when she played on the street with the older children when she cried when she'd fight she was only three

always defiant bring her home my mother would tell me keep her safe hold her hand bring her home

I visit her on April 29th west coast to east to celebrate this blessed arrival gold frankincense myrrh