

Excerpts from In This Room

Roberta Allen

Lea is his age now, the age he was when he took his own life on this day fifty years ago. As she sits at the white table, drinking coffee, she sees his death in the half-filled cup. His death lives in this room. His death lives in this silence. But his is not the only death that lives in this room, in this silence. These old walls hear everything, even what isn't said. Caught within these walls are longings, fears, curses, anger, hopes, dreams, shouts, broken hearts. Even laughter. Maybe love. At times, she feels the lives before hers in this room and she thinks of death as just another form of life. On the chinning bar in the bathroom doorway, which she's never removed, she sees a man slowly raise himself up with his arms. She sees him closing the Murphy bed where her bookshelves are now.

This old brick house—

One-hundred fifty years old.

A Greek Revival style rowhouse.

A landmark building.

Once, rich people lived here.

Rich people with servants.

The servants lived above her—

In a fourth story that was added on later.

At times, the ceiling leaks uncontrollable tears. Tears pent up over decades, maybe a century or more. Tears of tenants long gone, tears of tenants living and dead.

In the walls are words. Forever unsaid.

Unspoken.

Words living there within the walls.

Alive.

But trapped.

What words hasn't Lea said?

Lea is one of the "Lifers."

The landlord calls them Lifers. There were four. Only three now. The eldest, who had porcelain skin like Lea's mother and Nana, passed away at eighty-six. A heart attack. Sudden. A pauper's grave.

Her things in the street as though she'd never lived.

She lived. She lived! Lea wants to say.

But who will listen?

Her rooms are a doctor's office now. The landlord's son, a doctor. A bad doctor, Lea wants to say.

The landlord's mother showed Lea this room many years ago. It was dark, almost evening. The room was dark like Nana's rooms in daylight. Nothing much to see. The Murphy bed. An ugly plywood counter by the kitchen. As soon as she moved in, she removed them. The marble mantel painted royal blue before she stripped it. The Benjamin Franklin fireplace in disuse.

It was a sad place.

Only the chinning bar remains and some burnt coal in the fireplace she didn't dare use after the fire, the big one.

...

Lea is his age now, the age he was when he took his own life on this day fifty years ago. How can she be his age? She can't be sixty-six.

Sixty-six?

Lines. Wrinkles.

How did this happen?

When?

It must have happened when she turned the other way.

Why wasn't she warned?

Given a signal.

A loud buzzing.

A clanging.

A ringing in her ears.

A bang on the door.

A cry from a neighbor.

A shout from the street.

How could age creep up without making a sound?

Just yesterday...

Have others seen it coming?

Who can know in advance what aging is like?

How it looks?

How it feels?

If someone asked what sixty-six is like, she would say when she looks up, the sky is low.

Too low.

The sky is a ceiling now.

How to rise with the sky so low?

Her outstretched hand can almost touch it.

She wants to smash this sky.

This sky hard as glass.

She wants space to grow.

Not like him.

And yet...

"You are your father's daughter!" her mother and Nana said over and over.

Lea looks at age spots on her hands.

How did they get there?

She feels with fingers deep lines from nose to mouth.

...

Lea looks up at the antique glass bottles on the shelf by the window. They're ageless in Lea's eyes. Her collection of beautiful glass bottles distract her from thoughts about his age, her age. Aging. This crowd of bottles, three or four deep, each one unique, the ones in back barely visible. Eighteenth, nineteenth, early twentieth-century bottles.

Sometimes she glances at them for a second or two.

Other times, like now, she takes them in as though breathing their forms, their colors inside her body.

Deep inside.

Lets them fill an emptiness.
These empty bottles.
Medicinal bottles that once held bitters, cures, purifiers.
Bottles for chemicals, poisons.
Condiment bottles.
Soda water bottles.
Whiskey flasks.
Wine bottles.
Ink wells.
So many shapes and sizes.
Tall and thin.
Short and squat.
Delicate.
Wide-necked.
Narrow-necked.
Multi-sided.
Smooth or embossed.
Some free blown.
So many colors.
Amber, reddish amber, dark amber.
Pale green, olive green, emerald green, forest green.
Blue-green, cobalt blue, sapphire blue, pale blue.
Clear, milky, many of them long in the earth.
Iridescent after long exposure to dampness.
Over time, a clear bottle turned amethyst by the sun.

Such pleasure, they give her such pleasure, especially when sun strikes the glass and they shimmer with new life. If only life were as simple as the pleasure of looking at these glass bottles.

On a low bookcase next to the window with the bottles, she sees the hand-tooled leather boxes she bought from nomadic Tuaregs. She bought them in Timbuktu. She goes over to the beautiful round hand-tooled leather boxes, picks up each one, admires the geometric designs in black and maroon, imagines the hands that colored and embossed them. Slender hands. She opens one of the boxes. Silver necklaces with intricate designs, delicately wrought with symbols for ancient blessings. She sees their tall slender figures, their blue head coverings, only their eyes visible, their long blue robes blowing gracefully in the wind. Sand blowing everywhere. Windblown sand. The Saharan sand that found its way into her eyes, her ears, her nose, her mouth.

Timbuktu, a city drowning in sand.

Her guide, a student of the Koran, misshapen by polio, his legs like pretzels, used a curved wooden stick to hop from place to place. What a beautiful face he had.

Their first stop a traditional tent. Two men sold jewelry. The entrance so small, she had to crawl inside on all fours. Was the entrance as small as she remembers? Or had sand encroached upon the entrance? Inside, it was dark and close.

Dark and close like Nana's rooms.

Lea is not a hoarder like Nana and her mother.

She is a collector of beautiful small things. They take up miraculously little space in her room which is clean and orderly, every object arranged just right in a room arranged just right.

A room that appears spacious despite its small size.

A room arranged by an artist.

The room of an artist who collects beautiful small things.

Beautiful things don't disappoint, don't turn on you, don't do the unexpected. They are there when you want them, not there when you don't. They expect nothing, take nothing, want nothing, need nothing. They don't hurt you, frighten you, betray you, leave you, don't cause you any harm.

In the night Lea, the child of four, hidden behind the drapes, watched him leave, he and his suitcase. His silent leaving had lived in her sleep, had awoken her. His many "trips." This one the longest. Two years? Three? Without him, who could protect her from her mother and Nana? Where was he all that time? Even when he came back, how much could he protect her? The gambling, always the gambling. The racetrack. Poker games. Loan sharks. Debts. So many debts. Mafia goons threatening his life. At the end, he said to Lea, "I'm too old to run." She knew that last morning what he was going to do when he said to her, "I'm not coming home tonight."

She didn't try to stop him.

She was seventeen.

...

Lea sits at the table as though in a dream.

Where is she?

The mid-sixties.

The weeks before Europe, before she became a painter.

She lived alone, found a room in Gramercy Park, worked across town. She was nineteen.

Every day when she walked out of work into the street at lunchtime and after work too, it was as though life had turned itself inside out, had let her *see*, had shown her what is hidden in the everyday. She had seen perfection, had *known* life as perfection.

How funny, how crazy, she has to laugh, the thought of it now.

Didn't mystics have this experience?

Didn't William James write about it?

It would happen suddenly. This lightness. This weightlessness. As though life was showing her there were no limits. There was only life. Her self, a breathing fabric. Not a self, and yet there she was, still in her body. A self without limits. It happened every workday in the weeks before she went abroad for the first time.

She told her married lover then.

He seemed to understand.

That knowing.

That Life with a capital "L"—

Hidden by the ordinary world.

Then, after lunch, back to the ordinary world of the printing plant, doing layouts and paste-ups. The window in her little office lets in reddish light at 4pm in winter. Warm reddish light on that sliver of brick wall she sees from the window, the same warm reddish light staining the entire sky. The entire sky in her window.

After work, walking down side streets, again there is Life. Those tree-lined streets. Not warm enough for buds but every tree perfect the way it is. Wherever she looks, there is only perfection. Every brick in every brownstone. Every façade. Every window. Every door. Every edge against the sky. Every passing car, the motorcycle parked below a window. This

clarity.

Perfection.

Lea, outside the ordinary mind, the ordinary world.

She knows then, only the small mind sees imperfection. The larger mind is life.

Impossible to imagine, impossible to comprehend with the everyday mind.

The small mind sees only the small world.

Lea, inside that clarity, strode back and forth along those side streets. Back and forth. Everything in its rightful place. That perfection of line and form and color and sound and space.

And yet—

In a little corner, her everyday mind. So small she was scarcely aware of it: her everyday mind, small and scared.

What if she doesn't come back?

Where will she be?

Who will she be?

Each time, little by little, she came back.

It might take an hour or so for the rumbling of trucks to be just the rumbling of trucks. The honking horns, the shouts, the people scurrying along gray streets are only that. No more.

Back in ordinary life.

A relief.

Part of her felt relief.

Who could stay in that life without limits? Mystics? Holy men? Crazy people? On the phone, she listened to friends trip on LSD. Were they in the Mind where she had been?

...

She thinks of him, the one who *davened* every morning, who made her kiss that Hebrew letter for Life he told her was God.

Isn't God just another name for Life?

Life with a capital "L."

Even before those lunch breaks, those walks, Lea thinks back a little further to the paintings of Magritte. They were not oils on canvas, they were worlds she entered, worlds without end, worlds more real than any she had known. She thinks back to *The Palace Of Curtains*. A canvas with two identical painted frames: inside one, an image of sky, inside the other, the painted word for sky in French.

That painting.

Since then, in so many works of art, hints of that hidden world. The real world. The perfect world. She wanted others to know what she had known.

She still does.

That knowing was a gift.

It still is.

Perfection lives in moments of wonder.

She finds hints of perfection in the ordinary world.

That instant of discovery on a beach.

That reaching down, retrieving a perfect shell.

That shell, an object of perfection fallen through into the everyday world.

...

Did he ever feel wonder? Lea asks herself. She asked this same question years ago, high in the air, her face pressed against the windowpane on the flight to Lima, her eyes following the contours of looming mountains, gleaming snake-like rivers. The mystery of land and water and air.

She goes to the window with the jade plants and the trailing ivy. Noise outside. Distracting. A distance away, the co-op building. Fire escapes. Behind blue mesh, men on a scaffold. Running up and down. Shouting. Hammering. Metal clanging. Her hands to her ears, she shakes her head. She hates noise. Noise is Nana shouting at dead relatives about her dead husband, William Lee, while little Lea draws at the table in the crowded kitchen alcove. Nana forgets Lea is there. Only then does she stop watching Lea with hawk-like eyes. "William Lee was a lawyer! He should never have listened to his mother! It's her fault he died young! He would never have died at sixty-three if he'd practiced law!"

At night William Lee haunts Nana's bedroom. "Did you see the doorknob turn? Did you hear the door open? It was him!" Her mother nods. That's the only time she agrees with her mother.

Nana's kitchen, Nana's voice, so clear in Lea's mind, even now as she sits at the white table.

In her cup—

Only a drop of coffee left.

Lea checks the time.

Was she always this concerned—

With time?

She shakes her head.

No, it's part of aging—

Her aging.

At sixty-six—

The past is long.

So much to remember.

Were Lea's memories the same five years ago?

Ten years ago?

Twenty?

How much do memories change over time?

How do we know where memory ends, where imagination begins?

What can we remember without imagining?

Without pictures, voices in our heads?

Do we recall the event itself?

Or our memory—

Of the event?

Can the act of remembering—

Change what she remembers?

Are some memories—

Some events—

So ingrained—

So deeply embedded—

They never change?

Lea would swear that what she remembers is true.

Who can say otherwise?

...

More noise! Even louder!

How can Lea think with so much noise!

Noise was not only Nana. Noise was her mother and Nana, her mother and him. Noise was her mother shrieking at her.

Her mother.

Her mother in the nursing home at eighty-six. Her mother, the terror of the nursing home. She could no longer walk. Arthritis. Until then, she had a male companion, had her hair done every week. But he never called, never came to see her in the nursing home.

Her slow unravelling.

Lea watches her unravel like an old faded sweater; loosening threads disengaging, one from another, coming apart. She goes to visit her nearly every week, tries to calm her. It's a slow process, it happens over time. As she loses her memory, she slowly loses her rage, her bitterness, her disappointment. What's left she takes out on those who care for her, the nurses, the nurses' aides. Women with low wages from the islands. Jamaica. Trinidad. Grenada. Her mother calls them names. Horrific names. But little by little she loses the mean self, the angry self, the cruel self.

Slowly, she loses her mind.

"I'm nothing," she says to Lea when she still can. Her clear blue eyes look sad.

"That's not true," Lea says. "You're my mother."

An image from his funeral comes to Lea now. Her mother *entertaining* by his casket. Smiling. Laughing. Flirting. This is her party. She's the *life* of the party as family and friends and acquaintances pay their respects. She is noticed. Finally, she's the center of attention. She's somebody.

At the time, Lea had to look away. Disgust, she felt only disgust.

Before the nursing home, she slowly saw her mother change. Was it age that changed her? Wasn't it Lea who had changed too? "I'm sorry I didn't give you a better father," she said one night in a restaurant.

She never said she wished she could have been a better mother.

She could only see so far. Lea knew that.

Lea couldn't let herself know until now that she still longed for her mother's love as much as she had longed for it when she was a child.

When Lea was young, she blamed her mother for his death. "You were so horrible to him! No wonder he killed himself!" Lea screamed, over and over.

She had to believe his death was her mother's fault then.

Better her mother's fault than hers.

Their arguments.

Arguments about everything.

About nothing.

Nothing but arguments.

She and her mother shouting hurtful things.

Terrible things.

Her words come at Lea now.

Like fists flying in her face.

Those words her mother screamed—

Long before her mother became her child.

Her sweet innocent child.

Her mother, the little child in the wheelchair, arthritic hands like claws, body twisted by arthritis, legs twisted too. She's so happy to see Lea. "Your daughter's here," the aide says to her mother. "You know who this is." The little child with clear blue eyes lights up when Lea enters the dining room. She smiles like a baby. Almost toothless. This tiny shrunken child Lea could hug and kiss and embrace.

This tiny shrunken mother.

At last, a mother.

Lea thinks of the day a year or so before the end. Her mother's eyes dart anxiously around her room. "What are you looking for?" Lea asks.

"Tomorrow," her mother says.

At last, a mother.

It didn't matter that her mother was a little child.

A baby at the end.

Until the very end, Lea longed for her mother's love.

All her life Lea longing for her mother's love.

Longing even on her mother's final day.

Longing even when her mother can't speak, can't open her eyes.

Her mother holding on to life by a thread.

Dead at ninety-nine.

It's over now.

All over.

Never over.

She brushes a tear from her eye.

