

**James Cihlar**

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## **My Mother's Gifts**

I.

What she gave me.  
Howard Johnson's hot chocolate.  
Ironstone cups and saucers.

The Center Shopping Mall.  
Table heaped with Christmas decorations  
Outside Younkers Department Store.  
Glitter, wax, holly, Santa.

A & W Drive In.  
Tray perched on driver's window.  
Red and white checked wax paper.  
Red plastic open weave basket.  
Salt and potatoes.

Strand Theatre.  
Jerry Lewis matinee.  
The Big Mouth.

II.

What she had.  
An explorer's curiosity.  
Love of neighborhoods

But not of neighbors.  
Weakness for strays.  
Cats, dogs, children,  
Sisters, mothers, men.

Regular observance of holidays.  
Poinsettia, lily, fireworks, cake.

Reputation as a clotheshorse.  
An urban sense of humor.  
Nothing expected in a Midwesterner.  
Dismissal of convention.

The ability to draw.  
Attention to details.  
Love of dime stores  
And secondhand shops.  
Endurance. Fascination.

III.

What I didn't know she had.  
Letter from her best friend in high school.  
If only her mother hadn't remarried and moved her to a small town.  
We dreamt about changing the world.  
We dreamt about wearing the highest heels.

Photos of her before marriage.  
Dark circle skirt and light beret.  
Shoulder-length blonde hair.

IV.

What she bequeathed me.  
Being my own parent.  
Surviving my mistakes.

V.

What I brought home after visiting her in hospice.  
Indigo blue Murano bracelet.  
Fifties aqua Brush McCoy Gladiola vase.

Glimpse of her face waking up from medication  
Reading the room around her.  
IV drip, heart monitor, call button, estranged son,

Middle-aged, gay.  
Stream of daughters, sisters, in-laws.

Long-lost aunts and uncles.  
Hostesses at restaurants. European travelers.  
Condo dwellers.

VI.  
What I use every day.  
Victorian sheet music stand.  
African woven basket.  
Coir rug in front of the sink.  
Clouds in pale blue border.  
Inset rectangle of periwinkle sky.  
Rainbow fan of kites flying away.



*"Kathleen and Dylan and Luna." Photo: Rita Hermann.*