

EVERLASTING LIFE

Sheila Packa

When her mother said to let the cat in, Liz was pressing buttons on the accordion. She reached up and opened the door. A dead bird was on the step, and the cat was carefully washing her white-mittened paws. The horrible creature made a game of killing things.

There were three accordions in the house. They belonged to her mother and father and Liz, the middle child. Her older sister Donna didn't want one, and her baby sister Violet was too little. Two accordions were large and too heavy for Liz's shoulders. One was just right. When she pulled the bellows apart, a sound stretched out for a long time. When Liz lifted the cat, it stretched down to the floor and then scratched her to get away. Then came the day when the cow was butchered.

Everything that was born died: the puppies, cats, and chicks whose yellow fluff began to patch as they grew and turn to small quills of feathers. The chickens clucked in the yard. They too were soon gone, wrapped in white freezer paper. The kittens scampered after mice in the hay barn and climbed the bales high in the loft near the small window near the peak. The sunlight fell in dusty beams. Death had always been there, in the cows, the placid cows that chewed their cud. This was farm life. Livestock was meat. Even the horses knew birth and death was all around them. They could hear everything with their erect ears and see everything with inquisitive, long-lashed eyes that had clear and thick corneas. It wasn't anything to dwell on. The scent of their hide lingered on her hands. They twitched their hide to shake off the flies, swished their tails, and then pounded their hooves on the earth.

Her father skinned the hide from the cow and used the tractor to hoist the carcass up upon a triangle of logs. Her mother had told her to stay inside, and she should have. The carcass was marbled crimson and white, and the world around was surging with insect wings, seedlings breaking through the soil, birds fledging from their nests, and animals giving birth.

That same week, while her father was on the tractor making hay and Liz was playing in the yard, she came across the toad, larger than her hand. It

didn't jump away, not even when she prodded it with a large rusty nail found in the grass. She poked it. Didn't her mother find her there and take her away? No, somehow she didn't know. With half closed eyelids, as the tractor surged in the field, Liz pushed the nail harder, breaking through layer of skin and organ through to the sod. The toad did not resist. She remembered the spots upon the skin. Squinting and breathing hard, she did not relent. Her sweaty brown hair clutched at her shoulder blades as she drove her stake through lungs or liver in the noon-day heat. Her father didn't know either, and he was a man who would not have liked to find a nail in the grass.

That night back at home, when she had climbed out of her bath in the galvanized laundry tub filled with warm water and set near the kitchen range, Liz did not feel clean. She made waves that rocked the bar of Ivory soap floating on the surface of the gray water. She did not look at herself in the mirror as her mother braided her hair. Liz didn't tell her mother what had happened. If she had, her mother might have said it must have been already dead. The secret was too horrid to speak. Liz could smell the toad in the blanket with the silken edge, and she could even smell it under the bed. When the cat jumped and settled itself to sleep in the blankets, Liz could smell the dank and heavy nail.

Was death a shadow darting somewhere, like in the strange doubling at the beveled edge of mirrors? She felt it in the windows that glowed at evening in the darkening house, framing pine tree silhouettes against the pale sky and in the sunset flame that rose up before nightfall and extinguished the light. One thing she knew was this: she was never going to eat meat. Not ever.

In the summer, time stretched out. But then the rabbit came into the house, and Liz was unprepared. Her father had slaughtered and skinned it and put it on a pink plate in the fridge. The thing looked nothing like a rabbit—it actually looked like a skinny, headless baby.

In the bright refrigerator light, Liz stared.

"What's your problem?" her older sister Donna asked, reaching past her for a bottle of milk.

Liz abruptly turned and ran, accidentally knocking the milk from her sister's hand. If they expected her to eat rabbit, she wouldn't. She couldn't. Outside, at the rabbit hutch, the rabbits came toward her. They were looking for the carrots she always brought, but this time her hands were empty.

"Don't worry," she said, looking toward the house. The cat was on the step, staring. Her mother was probably on the floor with a towel to wipe up the spill. Liz turned the wooden handle locking the door of their cage and opened

the door. She picked up the furry white and black rabbit, which squirmed in her arms, and she cradled it for a moment and then put it on the ground. Funny how she had noticed how much the cows' hides were like the rabbits' coloring, white and black. The cows' hides were tough, but the rabbits were soft.

"Go," she urged. The rabbit merely began nibbling on the grass at her feet. She lifted the others out of the hutch. The rabbits were not at all alarmed. They didn't seem to understand their situation. They weren't pets like they were at other people's houses. She carried them into the pine trees. "I said go! Get out of here."

Liz did not go into the house for a long time. She picked fresh peas from the garden, and she gathered wild strawberries to eat. Eventually, casually, she went into the back porch. She heard her parents talking, the murmur of voices barely audible. She heard the phone ring. Donna came in from the barn. When the door opened, Liz heard a blare of the television news. Her father picked up the accordion, and as he put it away, it seemed to gasp. People in her family played the accordion, and everybody danced. Her grandfather played it. Her uncles and aunts played it in taverns and at dances. Her mother listened to accordion music on the record player, and they danced in the living room. Liz played the small accordion too, but her sound was racket, not music.

She heard the latches of the accordion snap shut. She was watching her mother in the kitchen as she took out the rabbit and salted and peppered it and dredged it in flour. She peeled potatoes and put them on to boil and shelled the peas.

Later at the table, Liz ate her potatoes. She buttered her bread with thick salty butter, but she wouldn't touch the meat. Donna sat beside her, wiping a bit of grease and juice from the corner of her mouth.

"She's not eating," Donna said, drawing their parents' attention to what remained on Liz's plate. Liz felt herself turn cold.

"Do you have a temperature again?" her mother said, placing her hand on her forehead.

"A stomachache," Liz said.

"One bite," her father ordered.

Her mother collected the dishes to bring them to the sink. She stood at the window looking out. "Somebody needs to take that tree down," she said.

"It hurts really bad."

"Are we going to have to go through this again?" he asked, more to himself than to her. He picked up the fork and stabbed the flesh and brought it to Liz's mouth. No matter how hard he tried to stuff the forkful of food in her mouth,

she clamped her mouth shut. She slunk down in the kitchen chair until her feet touched the floor. He pulled her back up and pushed her shoulders against the back of the chair. His hand clutched her jaw and tried to pry her mouth open, but she clenched her muscles tight. She sobbed, but the sound came through her nose, and mucus came out with it too. Her legs were kicking.

Her mother turned to face them. . "Herbert," she said. "Herb? She doesn't feel well," her mother said softly.

"Phfft." Her father sat back in his chair and tossed down the fork and glared at them both.

Liz closed her eyes and said nothing, pretending she wasn't there. *Lay down and play dead*. This was what they had told her to do if a bear ever attacked. The dog had treed a bear once, a big terrible bear with cubs. Her father was like a bear that had gotten into the house. The hardness in her jaw was still there. Liz held her breath until she couldn't hold her breath anymore, and then she accidentally coughed.

Liz was sent to her room. In her little bed, she covered her head with the blanket and turned her face to the wall and sniffled. Donna came in and undressed in the dark and got into her bed nearby.

"You better not give me any of your germs," Donna said before she turned out the light. Liz stared into the dark room, and she thought she saw a head hanging from the ceiling, but maybe it was the light fixture.

"Elizabeth. The door to the rabbit hutch was left open," her mother said in the kitchen the next morning. "You let the rabbits out on purpose."

"I didn't." Liz sat and colored a picture with crayons at the kitchen table. Her mother was at the counter with Violet, the baby, on her hip, putting supper together with one hand. Liz didn't like to be called Elizabeth or Beth or Betsy or Little Bit. Everybody called her something different, and hardly anybody called her what she preferred. She was still hurt because her mother didn't name her Violet, which was a much better name.

"The dog could have gotten them. Maybe the wolves did." Her mother put Violet in the highchair and tied the bib under her chin.

Liz felt justified, but she didn't admit to her deed. She turned the page and drew the house, the tree, a bird and a rabbit. She drew the sun with its radiant circle round as an empty plate. The rabbit was eating four-leaf clovers, and it was not about to be butchered.

But then something happened to her grandmother. The signs had not been good. Her father wanted to see how she was getting along. Her mother had her

hands full, so Liz grabbed her doll and went with him. The house had the smell of wood smoke and kerosene and something else. In fact, it smelled a little bit like a toad.

Grandmother Helena's thin gray hair was rolled and pinned into a bun. Bulging veins lifted the loose skin of her rather large hands. Her eyes lit up when Liz came up the steps, and she immediately offered her a piece of ribbon candy from the tin, the same ribbon candy she'd had for a long time. Because Liz had been admonished to be polite and take whatever she was offered, she politely took one piece and put the gluey morsel in her pocket. The kitchen cooking range was warm, and her father made coffee for all of them. He rummaged and found a package of cinnamon toast. They dunked the dry toast in their coffee cups. Liz's toast had fallen inside the cup of coffee where it lay in a soggy heap, sort of like fish eggs in swamp water.

"How come you didn't bring your new baby?" Grandma asked.

"It was time for her nap," Liz's father said.

"Babies sleep now because when they get old, they can't sleep at all," her grandmother said. "And how are you getting on with your new sister?"

"She's even more fussy," her father said.

"Let her fuss. Fussy doesn't hurt anything," her grandmother said. She sipped her cup and winked at Liz.

He asked his mother how she was doing in English, and she replied in Finnish.

Liz went into the front room with her doll. There were just two rooms in all. There had once been a new house that burnt down soon after it was built. A chimney fire had started and blown out the tin plate on the chimney flue upstairs, the place where they had planned another stove, but it hadn't been installed. A bit of foolishness, to avoid buying a proper tin cover, her father had said to her once, penny-wise and pound-foolish.

A heavy sofa made of carved wood and cranberry red upholstery, covered with a hand-made lace doily, was shoved into the corner, and the spinning wheel was by the window. In a basket nearby were wood handled metal brushes to card the wool. There were spindles. Grandmother spun wool from the sheep, and from the wool, she knitted slippers and mitts that she boiled in the copper boiler in order to turn them into thick felt. As always, Liz wanted to spin the spinning wheel to see how fast it could go, but her father warned her not to monkey around because Grandma wasn't feeling well.

Instead of a television, there was a radio in a wooden cabinet and a bird-cage where a small parakeet chirped. A curtain marked off the area of her bed and the sewing machine. Liz's grandfather didn't live there. He lived in a shack a mile down the road in her aunt's yard. People walked on pins and needles around him. He wasn't the nicest man. After he moved out, her dad and the other kids stayed to help on the farm to milk the cows, to make butter, and to sell butter, cream and eggs.

In the kitchen, their voices were becoming louder.

Liz asked her father why he was hollering at her grandmother.

"I'm not hollering at her," her father answered.

"Yes, you are," Liz said.

"She needs to see a doctor," he said, standing up and sweeping up Liz. He brought her out to the car and put her in the front seat and went back to collect her grandmother and half-carried her down the steps. She was carrying her knitting. He opened the back door and guided the old woman in. Her grandmother lay down and her hands went up, down, as if she were making a half-hearted attempt to fly away. Without words, he drove to the hospital.

Liz waited in the hospital lobby with the bag of her grandmother's knitting. She pulled out the homespun yarn and wrapped it over the wooden arms

of the chair. Children were not allowed to visit patients. Her aunts appeared one by one, spoke to her briefly, and then hurried to the hospital room. She pulled out even more yarn and tied her chair to the next and to the next, and that is when she noticed a brown spot on her wrist bone. It must have come because of the toad. She began rubbing her wrist frantically, and she ran to the bathroom and lathered it with soap. Nothing worked.

It wasn't until she and her father were back at home when she realized the doll was still at her grandmother's house. The clouds built like dark towers and thundered, and her parents talked in the dark living room about a tumble her grandmother had taken. She wasn't careful, they said.

Now there was a funeral. Liz's parents explained to her what had happened. There was too much fluid built up inside her grandmother, and she drowned in her own body. Congestive heart failure. Liz imagined a pail full of water in the woman's chest. She imagined it sloshed over when she fell and spilled into other places. Her legs had swelled. They had filled with fluid. Her mother said they only buried the body, but her spirit left and flew to heaven like a bird, and heaven was above the clouds, above the airplanes, way, way up where angels lived. But where did the water go? Liz wondered. Her father

added that death was like sleep, only people never wake up. Her father clutched Liz's shoulder with his big hand when they spoke.

Some of her grandmother's things had already been parceled out. When the doll returned, it arrived with Grandma's parakeet. The spinning wheel was going to one of her aunts, and the sewing machine somewhere else with all the fabrics and notions. At the small church, at the funeral, there was a dark coffin on a wheeled cart, and the women wore small hats with veils pulled down over their eyes, and Liz couldn't see much at the front except the florid face of the minister.

"Verily, he that believes in him that sent me, hath everlasting life," he proclaimed, eyes gleaming. Liz was shocked to hear him say something so obviously false. She looked down at her shoes, good shoes, polished by her mother. A lady pressed her fingers on the organ keys, and the sound came from somewhere else. The aunts whispered some more.

After the service, coffee and lemon bars and triangle sandwiches made of bologna and pickles or egg salad were served downstairs, and she was allowed to select the food herself. She put an egg salad sandwich on her plate. There was a trip to the cemetery, a stuffy ride in the back seat with fussy Violet. The long dark hearse went first. Their car was next in line in a caravan of vehicles,

all with lit headlights in broad daylight on the road that ran along the St Louis River. They put her grandmother in the ground. Liz wondered how she was ever going to breathe in there, much less sit and knit.

After the graveside ceremony, when her father poured shots of brandy with the pallbearers, her mother took her down to the river to watch the tiny ripples and swirls and small waves come along the banks and under the pilings of the bridge. The children were running along the banks, and Liz followed until she had goosebumps and scraped knees. They didn't go swimming, but they could drop leaves in the river and watch them catch varying currents, and they could see if the tiny stones they threw could reach the other side.

After, when all the relatives went back to her grandmother's house, the accordions came out, and the music was loud. Liz walked along the edge of the room, far enough away. When her father sat down to talk, he looked down into his oversized hands, but he didn't have anything to say. He brought his fingertips together, the palms apart, for just a moment, making a cage or a shelter—and it was empty. When they left, her father carried the sleeping Violet, and her mother carried a box of plates.

Time passed. One day, maybe not so long after this, the table was set with her grandmother's plates. They were heavy plates, vitreous china. Appalled, Liz discovered a piece of meat on hers.

She pushed the morsel under the shade of a lettuce leaf, and then slid it into her hand that she slowly dropped under the table where the dog was waiting for a treat. He snapped his jaws, and her father rose without a word and put him outside. He came back and put another piece of meat on Liz's plate. She looked away. Her older sister finished her meal and went to the barn to tend to the horses. Her mother stood up and began putting dishes in the sink. Liz asked to be excused. She scanned the counter and stared at the stainless and distorted reflection in the toaster.

"Come now," her father said, nodding at the uneaten food in front of her. "How long are we going to let her go on like that?" he asked. Her mother didn't answer.

Liz glanced at the back door, and then she flung herself down on the linoleum in a violent burst.

With frustration, her father lunged down to drag her out from under the table and put her back in her chair. He pinched her nose until her mouth

opened for breath, and then he pushed in the meat. The congealed flesh with a spongy area of fat was on her tongue. She gagged and spit it out.

"Stop that," he commanded.

Her head fell forward like the doll's, her hair hung over her face.

"Enough. You must eat. If you don't eat, you'll die."

"I can't," Liz sputtered.

"It's your funeral!" her father said in exasperation. He used the fork to pluck up the meat from her chest and aimed for her mouth again. Once again she clamped down, tight as she could.

"Oh dear!" her mother said, coming with a towel. "It's just a stage."

Liz was sent to her room for the night.

"You're so finicky," her mother said as she held out the nightgown and helped her get ready for bed. "Just a little won't hurt you."

"There was a vein," Liz said miserably. It was hopeless, and she looked down and noticed her arms were covered with red blotches, raised islands on her skin. "Look."

Her mother grabbed her arms and looked and found more blotches all over her skin on her legs and torso. They itched like crazy.

"They must be an allergic reaction!" her mother said and disappeared.

Liz could hear the barely audible voices of her mother and father down the hall. Her mother brought in her father to look at the splotches. His dark and silent shadow filled the wall over her and across the bed. Then her parents went back to their bedroom and shut the door on their conversation. No, she was not going to be brought to the hospital.

Her mother brought out the pink calamine lotion and rubbed her limbs and brought her a bowl of cereal and milk that she ate in the bedroom. The hives were fading. Liz felt fine now that her body had provided proof that she absolutely could not eat meat. Too bad she didn't like vegetables either.

Life on the farm resumed.

Liz was in the front room with the small accordion in her lap.

"You have to play the right notes. Use your ear," her mother told her on her way down to the washing machine in the basement. Her parents were always saying things like this. *Listen. Use your head.*

She was about ready to give up. She went to look at the parakeet. Liz tried to get the bird to talk. The parakeet was nervous, for the cat was always watching. The room had a green cast, stained by the sun shining through the leaves. The doll was in the corner, her string broken and her clothes lost. The bird

raised her wings and folded them again. She chirped and flitted between one perch and the other.

"Do birds even have a tongue?" Liz asked, and she tried to see beyond its beak. Inside the cage was a bit of suet and a tiny cup of birdseed. There was a small watering device in the cage that by the force of gravity kept water available. At the bottom was a lining of newspaper with tiny splats of bird poop and fallen seeds and little bits of feather. The seeds and feathers littered the sewing cabinet and floor.

In the infant seat, Violet kicked her feet. She had pale blond hair, wispy and barely visible, and eczema on her cheeks.

The agitator of the washing machine had a regular rhythm that rose up from the basement. Liz could smell the suds. There was the sound of sloshing water in the galvanized tubs. Her mother brought up a basket full of work clothes and went out the door to pin them to the clotheslines. She gave each shirt and each pair of pants a brisk shake, and Liz could hear the snap and slap before they were hung with clothespins. The corner of a chambray shirt was lapped by the corner of another, and this was done to make the most efficient use of the clotheslines and wooden pins.

"Pretty bird," the parakeet said.

"Oh, that's your name!" Liz opened the cage and offered her finger. The parakeet sidled, lifting first one foot and then the other, and then leapt from the perch. She grasped her finger tightly with her tiny claws, weighing nothing. Sunlight spilled in the windows, and the baby laughed.

"Look," Liz said, pulling her hand out with the bird on her forefinger, along for the ride. Pretty Bird flew up to the cornice above the window. The cat jumped to the top of the stereo cabinet. Liz couldn't reach the parakeet, and it wouldn't come down. Pretty Bird flapped her wings, and maybe that was the reason Liz opened the front door.

The parakeet flew into the branches of the maple tree, and Liz could see her behind the leaves, swaying on the twigs, body and soul still united. Then she was gone. It was a cold truth, cold like in the clear, silvered stream of water pouring from the water hose into the stock tanks, startling cold. In the woods, pine cones dropped from high limbs. Some were sealed, and they were heavy, severed by the squirrels and stored in the roots of trees. Some were nearly weightless, tiny jewel boxes whose gems had been plundered.

She ran outside, calling for the bird, and immediately her mother was behind her and pulled her back into the house. She sat her down on the chair and put her face up to Liz's.

"Why did you open the outside door? Why did you let her go outside?"

Hadn't they talked about this? Her mother was yelling.

"I have a funny spot," Liz said, showing her the brown spot on her wrist.

"Do not leave Violet by herself," her mother said.

"I think it's a wart," she said.

Her mother slapped her face twice with a sudden move that Liz didn't see coming. Her mother's hands were damp. They stung.

"It's nothing. Nothing! By the time you get old, you'll have hundreds of them."

Liz's jaw dropped open.

"Not another word out of you." Her mother's eyes narrowed, and she added, "I mean it."

When she was seven, Liz didn't realize that was the last glimpse of the parakeet. Of course not! There would have been a predator, a hawk probably. The bird would not come back, could not have survived by herself. Just like she did not realize that everything in that moment—the horses with tails swishing flies—would disappear under new roads and new people. It would be just an ordinary loss, and something to be accepted even by the ones who had

touched the kitchen door, the stable, the warm hides of those animals, and heard their breath.

Sheila Packa is curious about encounters with animals (and birds and amphibians) and ways that these can shape a life. She lives in northern Minnesota. Her writing has appeared in *Entropy*, *Cortland Review*, *Chicago Memoryhouse*, *Ploughshares*, *Jet Fuel Review*, *Split Rock Review*, and several anthologies. She has four books of poems. In 2010-2012, she was Duluth's Poet Laureate.