
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Barbara Bottner: Two Poems

Barbara Bottner · Saturday, July 31st, 2021

DIRTY HABIT

A breeze pushes the fumes against my face.
My dad snuffs out a butt, then lights another,
says, "Look, kid, smoking's a dirty habit.
I'm going to quit soon."
"That's what Miss Noble,
my homeroom teacher, says," I offer.
"Who?" he asks.
"Miss Noble, the one you thought
was pretty."
He never remembers anything I tell him.
"Oh!" he says, and now he's smiling.
"Teach me to smoke!" I say.
His eyebrows meet above his nose,
and as the tip of the cigarette burns,
it sends smoke into the clear night
like a signal.
Maybe, across the Harlem River
someone will see it,
realize we are signaling: Help!

"Let me try it, please? I want to be like you!"
"No, you don't! Not now, not ever."
"But, Dad, at least I should know
what I'll be missing for the rest of my life."
He smiles so wide, I can see his molars.
"Well, you'll never know about the future,"
he says, ominously.
I grab his arm.
"Tell me the truth.
Are you thinking of leaving?"
"Leaving what?"
"Dad!"
"What?"
"Us! Please! Please don't leave!"

You can't. I mean it!
She hates me."
"Calm down, Maisie," he says.
My voice crackles.
"I'm just telling you, if you go,
she'll put me in the ground."
He ruffles my hair
as if I am being amusing.
I want to scream.
"Do you think I'm a rotten kid?"
"You're a great kid.
I like you exactly the way you are:
spirited, smart, your own person."
"Being my own person
is treacherous," I say.
He turns to me.
"Are you working me over?" he asks.
"Okay, you poor kid, one puff.
I'll give you one shot at it
but you have to do exactly what I say.
You have to learn how to inhale, okay?"
I do have to learn how to inhale.
How to breathe,
as if I belong here on the earth.

"When you take in the deepest breath
as if you have to last underwater
without air.
Then, you keep it in
as long as you possibly can."
"But you don't do that, Dad."
"I've been smoking a long time, kid.
Ready?" he says, and lights a fresh one.
I sit up tall under the stars,
put my feet on the bench,
straighten my back
so I can always remember
this moment, me and my dad,
on the same wavelength.
Me, trying to figure out
if he wants to protect me
while he's teaching me to smoke.

*

SMILE A LITTLE

At 7 A.M., the sun blasts through my window,
the most jubilant of friends.

Despite last night,
the miracle happens again:
I can somehow face the day.
I get close to the mirror.
My ears are too large,
my breasts are teeny.
My hair just looks depressed,
and where does my nose
think it's going?
I check for food stuck in my braces,
always a potential embarrassment.
The only positive development:
My eyelashes are getting thicker.
And my skirt seems kind of short.
Does that mean maybe
my legs are getting longer?
My mother peeks in, catches me looking.
"Don't fall in love with yourself.
I was better looking
when I was fourteen and a half."
"I know you were beautiful, Mom."
This sentence always pacifies her.
It happens to be true.
My mother was stunning.
But I wish I could ask her,
"Mom, how could I be in love with myself
when no one else is in love with me?"



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