

Samantha Armatys

Gloomy Sunday

A lifetime of my grandmother lines every shelf and surface. No one tells you that you eventually become a room. Porcelain dolls trapped under plastic bell jars full of stale air cover the entire wall. She was a girl once, somewhere else. Mail order subscriptions for the things that remind her of home.

Bodies fragile as memories arrived carefully wrapped. Plastic popping in my child mouth; tonguing the burst bubbles like gums after an abscess. I felt those tiny brittle limbs were untouchable then; everything in the house is untouchable still. I can never reach the objects she grasps for in dreams.

Grey: the colour of her skin blending into the ugly floral chair, the colour of the sky the moment after the sun has set on a cloudy day. More an absence of colour, of light. Almost translucent, the hue she is now, as if she is fading from existence shade by shade.

Soon it will just be the room and the things she owned.

Outside, high heels sink into uncut grass. The front lawn is full of relatives arguing about heirlooms, as if silver spoons could ever really mean anything to anyone. We are a family of women. Never space for the smell of men in our homes. Perhaps it's a genetic predisposition for the sweetness of lavender, the iron in blood.

They have been coming and going all day, even though looking mortality in the face makes our kind of women uncomfortable. Each of us brings a bouquet of discounted flowers already wilted from the shop lights. Plums left on her back step turn to prunes. Summer tasted of sweetness then.

The electric heater sucks moisture from the room. All those mothers, aunts, cousins, can feel their beauty evaporating. I feel it too. Rituals: pat under the chin a hundred times before bed, always apply lotion in upward circles, never smile too much or for too long—never. Crow's feet reflected in the blank screen of the television. Every mirror becomes a traitor eventually. All that sentimentality assigned to skin when it's already dead.

"Again for Nagyi."

In school no one else called grandmothers by that name. Heavy and satisfying in the mouth like stone fruit: the “gy” like the “dg” in dodge.

A sinewy twig of a finger stretches towards the gramophone, her voice as rough as acacia bark. Branches spread like an umbrella across her yard until, under the weight of my small frame, they dipped back down to earth like girls flicking their hair in a poem. I push the needle back; the record crackles. *Sunday is gloomy, my hours are slumberless. Dearest, the shadows I live with are numberless.* Rooms can be furnished with more than objects. Words score my memories of the space.

“Gloomy Sunday” is the song she wanted to die to, she said. She’d always known it. Singing over the Billie Holiday version in Hungarian, she liked the translation better, she just never learnt the words. Wine spittle as light as carnations landed on my skin. Laughing, she told me that she was a witch once, that she drank the blood of men. She never knew how to speak to a child.

When she was a young woman in Budapest everyone was dying to that song. Afternoon sun through lace cast kaleidoscopic veils of light over our faces as she showed me his only picture. Mother said it was morbid to talk about death so much. “No more than life,” she replied. Only people who have seen war can make sadness seem so banal.

Vinyl revolved as she fell willingly into that black hole. Now, the final note is ringing and her eyes are dancing. Dancing to the spinning melody, the world on its axis, a moon in orbit, all the constellations she has ever looked up at. Back across space and time.

Red plush curtains expel a cloud of dust under my hands. These hands are borrowed from her; the time borrowed back by the sun. Outside the window the Danube flows unhurried. A river has nowhere to be.

My eyes reflected in the window are green like apple skin. “You’re as crazy as her because you have her eyes,” Mother told me, hers brown like the seeds cut away from the core. These glass eyes are mine for a moment and will skip like stones until they find me again.

The door creaks behind me, the building groaning under the weight of recollection. “Stop looking at the river,” says a man. “You know it makes you sad to look at the river.” Arms extend towards me, and it’s as if all the dreadfulness of the world will cease to exist if I just collapse into them. I trace his silhouette. A shape I know.

I am a child again. Our small bodies lay side-by-side: hers frail with time, mine with the lack of it. Layers of wilted and formless skin quiver as she snores. A man-shaped shadow walks the walls. I watch until the sun takes him.

“A ghost circled the room,” I tell her in the morning. She says it was her lover; that he comes most nights to sing to her. *Little white flowers will never awaken you. Not where the black coach of sorrow has taken you.* “Why couldn’t I see his face?” I ask.

“He is just a beautiful shadow now,” she sighs. For the first time I know what love looks like. Trapped in the space between living and death. Carried on a melody of comfort. Grasping for the hand of a phantom and coming up with fingers entwined.

Then, I’m a teenager and particles of dust fill my nostrils. Stuck in the moment before a sneeze like the ache of what’s promised but never comes. The garage is a gift box. I unwrap it slowly, inspecting each unwanted object, careful not to tear away the edges, always saving something for later. Mother had a draw full of paper—joy synonymous with those recycled patterns.

The book is at the bottom of a box, forgotten. Ghoulish forms tangled in darkness and stars on the cover. Each page with a story that makes children cry somewhere in the world. I flick to the Hungarian Liderc, dishonest and cruel. Taking the form of love, it sings to you at night and steals you piece by piece. I put the book back in the box and decide then, nothing is as it seems.

Nagyi is fading; all her clocks tick out of synch. She is still somewhere else, sinking into him, her face pressed into the groove between his ribs. They stay like that until the light changes.

“It’s no world for a child,” she says.

He knows without asking; his eyes move to the place where the dress sags. Blue fabric that was filling up with the bloat of him is sunk like a ship now. He ties a yellow ribbon around her waist, as he did to a willow during his childhood, but I can see that he knows it’s not that kind of going, the kind where coming back is possible.

Bricks are replaced every day. Borders change their names like girls getting married. Bodies form from tissues and fluid but don’t resemble the ones they replace. She won’t

participate in any of it, that filling of voids. She holds on to the emptiness like a keepsake because home doesn't have a name anymore.

To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow. The apartment doesn't have enough light for plants. Flower stems crushed in his hands, his clumsy offering. All the petals fell off by morning but she kept them until the water turned green. She always held onto things for too long or not long enough, never in between. That's why she's a room now.

The gramophone crackles the end of the song: then and now. Papers on the desk are all blank. White doesn't turn into letters just because you want it to. She knows there's a bridge for times like these, but the river won't even take her. Shoes are placed neatly flush to the edge, beside them her folded coat. Objects always meant more than life to her. Veins creep over her skin, blooms of goose bumps across her shoulders. A heavy step into the air.

I feel the water sharp like knives. The quiet chill is like waking to pull the blankets up in the hour before sunrise, like bare feet on winter dew crunching like glass. Hands pull me up—pull her up. She wonders why, because no one is supposed to care about life anymore. She's heard it on the radio countless times.

Women shriek at our sinewy fingers wrapped around each other like a pastel zebra, grey and pink. Icy, she's still in the water somewhere, but smiling now. My hands let her go while I can, let her sink to the bottom of the Danube, to him, to home. Some of us want to go, and some of us never do. All the women cry at the colour of her, because they too will fade soon enough.

About the author: Samantha Armatys is completing her Honours in Creative Writing at Griffith University on the Gold Coast. She is happiest when she is close to the ocean. Her work has recently been published in *ArtAscent* and *Pure Slush*. "Gloomy Sunday" is an excerpt from her upcoming thesis submission, a composite novella titled *Budapest Smile Club*.