Fair [1]

May 25, 2015 Flash Nonfiction [2]
Family Stories [3]
Grief [4]

Flash Nonfiction by Kathryn Gahl

The day I see my daughter's sleeve of suicide stitches through a video monitor, listen to her—*I couldn't take it anymore*—my calves spasm. She has smothered her infant and failed at suicide. Now, the backs of my knees lock, and I plop down, beginning to track what whacked her. The long row of stitches inside her elbow stare back at me, the handiwork of a surgeon working with 3-0 vicryl. For all I know, he used black fishing line; that's what it looks like, a string of black knots marking her space on earth, as my adult son, sitting next to me, talks, and my feelings circle around remorse, wondering what buried history led her to this.

Later, I will smash-cut to her papa, trapped as a child in Nazi-occupied Rotterdam, starved for bread and attention. Could the air thunder and explosions that shaped him have passed to her like a dropped bomb? Which atrocity squashed his chromosomes? How did his sudden abandonment of me and our twelve-year-old daughter and nine-year-old son ignite the madness?

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Twenty-five years later, as I sag in the visiting room, I feel neither fight nor flight. I feel frozen. She stares at me with dulled eyes, her skin a ghoulish green from the psych hospital lighting or the clothes she wears or maybe it's the old video screen.

"Five minutes," the attendant says.

Then it is four and two, and then none. My son and I say goodbye.

Outside, he puts his arm around me and says, "Let's go to the fair."

It's an odd suggestion, but I go, leaden and lost in the dust of the midway, popcorn-scented air, elephant ears, a Tilt-A-Whirl slamming riders into happy terror, an arcade of tobacco fog, brown teeth, and a carnival barker barely twelve with his falsetto plea, *Step right up, a prize every time*. I think of a goldfish we brought home one year, swimming and trapped in a bag. When the barker hands me a rifle, I would rather slam a hammer to prove my strength, decimate the disease called deep depression, win back my craving for cream puffs, judge the blue-ribbon brownies, and pet Holland Lop bunnies in my lap as we people-watch.

"We are still in life," my son says. He's always full of elliptical aphorisms, the picker-upper, the peacemaker.

Once, I carried him when he could not walk, created air space when asthma crushed his nine-year-old chest, cheered at every basketball, baseball, and soccer match. At the fair, when the rooster doodle-does and the geese screech, he is startled, a village spirit who's never heard the barnyard *karoo* and *praak*. He bursts into hilarity, his mirth a medicine for my brokenness, his appetite for a Farm Bureau burger with the works catching.

Soon, he hands me a Sheboygan hard roll, dripping with butter, enclosing a thin pink patty. "Here, Mom," he says.

I take it and think, here. Yes. Here.

Art Information

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Kathryn Gahl writes by the light of her littlest love, Leo. Her poems and stories appear in many journals, including the *Notre Dame Review, Chautaqua,* and *Margie.* She believes in the transcendent power of red lipstick, dancing Tango, and deep sleep.

Her previous TW piece, Sure. [6] was a finalist for the 2013 Talking Writing Prize for Flash Fiction.

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[6] http://talkingwriting.com/sure

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