

The Museum of Odd Inheritance by Daughters from Mothers

by Liza Wieland

In her last year, my mother asked me to gather up all her jewelry and hide it from the cleaning lady (who was completely honest and devoted to my mother). And then my mother forgot all about it. And then she died. So I am in possession of the whole lot: the pearls real and fake, the gold, plate and solid.

When my sister came to visit our mother in the hospital, the nurses asked her to take off our mother's wedding ring. Steroids were causing her fingers to swell, and so the idea was better do that now than, you now, after.... Our mother protested mightily, but eventually the ring came off, and I presume my sister still has it.

I call these accidental leavings, different from inheritance.

My mother accidentally left us these things.

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My father tried once to leave on purpose, but that's another story.

Accidentally then, she left me her travel diary from the summer of 1951, her grand tour with college "pals," from London through twenty-two cities and home to Chicago from Rotterdam. She spent the most time in Paris and describes her time there in detailed, complete sentences and greater fondness. I read that she found a quiet place in every city and sat for a couple of hours sketching the buildings and the people. I discovered that she drank great quantities of beer and was often hung over in the mornings, and had several charming euphemisms for the late-night congress with men on the part of her girlfriends. I have deduced that somewhere there is a companion diary of sketches. This has probably been lost, which fills me with despair: my mother's eyes and hands describing the great capitals of Europe, vanished forever. I do have her last watercolor notebooks as consolation. I have noticed that, probably to save paper, she made half-page paintings, four and a half inches by six inches. Or, it occurs to me

now, all these watercolors have a horizon that cuts midway through the page. Most are landscapes or water views, so sky above, land or water below. I look at them, and then they break my heart with their loveliness, and I have to close up the pages for a couple of weeks. Sometimes my handwriting causes the word *loveliness* to look like *loneliness*. In this context, it doesn't matter which you see, because I think of her alone, too, setting up the paint box, filling a cup with water, standing at the sink. For almost sixty years she was never alone and then....

One of these half-sheets looks like she began with a sunset—but I can't be sure. There's too much yellow. The palette is Kandinsky: pink and deep green and salmon. The sunset became, at some point in her view, abstract. In fact, the sky is green, so I'm not even sure where I got the idea of sunset. But then, with charcoal, she drew three sets of lines from top to bottom, gathered in the middle like sheaves of burnt wheat or the letter K, or a splayed-leg tomato cage. I can't tell if she was trying for trees or angrily dismissing the picture.

This sums up my mother. The mysteries of her. I cannot comment further.

What we children inherited in the strictest sense came from our father: money. But this money had to pass first through the fortress of our mother's body, once that body became dust and ash. She was the Bureau d'Échange, exchanging currency. She was the ATM on the Champs Élysée, transforming money in the beautiful, foreign ether.

Doesn't every daughter live in a museum of odd inheritance? Because your mother painted her dining room red, so did you. Because your mother hung a mirror beside the front door, so did you. Your mother made her and your father's bed every morning first thing; you do this too. or else you feel unsettled. A certain high-end brand of enamel cookware from France, tomatoes ripening in the kitchen window, cloth napkins instead of paper. Family pictures arranged in neat semicircle on a low table, according not to chronology but to shape and height of the frames.

A goddamn chalkboard in the kitchen.

For a while, in the 90's, before my father died and my mother left that house—her next to last—for good, many of the pictures hanging on the walls and the decorative pieces on the mantel and the side tables were marked for future ownership by my

siblings. Color-coded post-it notes, or dots, all of them blank, usually on the back or the underside, but sometimes visible, on the glass in the lower right-hand corner, on the arm of the reclining 18th century porcelain woman like a neon nicotine patch. This apportionment happened while I was working far away, on the other side of the country. I thought of yard sales in upscale neighborhoods, where an actual sticker with an actual amount would have been considered crass, where the women who lived there had more than once been handed the menu on which the prices were not printed.

And I—devil child!—what did I do? One afternoon during the Christmas break when my father was napping in front of a golf match, and my mother was in the kitchen, I switched them, as many as I could find, in no particular order. I did not really even know who was blue and who was green and who was pink. I could guess, but it didn't really matter. Even the dots in plain sight I moved. Then I walked into the kitchen and sat at the white Parsons table and chatted with my mother, about what I can't remember.

And by the time my father died a few years later, all the colored dots had disappeared, fallen off, lost their power to stick. And my mother said, just take it somebody, anybody, just get it out of here, I don't give a damn.



Liza Wieland has published five novels, *Paris, 7 A.M.*, *Land of Enchantment*, *A Watch of Nightingales*, *Bombshell*, and *The Names of the Lost*, and three collections of short fiction, *Quickening*, *You Can Sleep While I Drive*, and *Discovering America*, as well as a book of poems, *Near Alcatraz*. She has won two Pushcart Prizes and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She has recently retired from teaching and lives in eastern North Carolina.