

Imaginary Chapel

My dying aunt said, "I've got three suitcases packed and ready to go.
Underneath the bed." I thought she meant go back to the hospital.
She repeated, "I packed all the things that should be saved.
Everything else, throw away when I'm gone. I'm ready to go anytime."
She wanted to talk about when she was young.
Our family stories were not what she wanted remembered of her.
Out of her halting words formed a series of stained glass windows
Adorning the chapel of her inner world.

Panel 1: the witch,

A plump middle-aged woman with salt and pepper hair,
Wide dark brown eyes, dressed simply,
A white blouse and a tan skirt, anyone would think
She was a secretary somewhere or a salesclerk,
Bends over a young girl to examine the whorls of her eyeball.
A dove hovers over them. "You are lucky, Pearl,"
The witch says. "You will die knowing perfect love."

Panel 2: upstairs,

Pearl's sailor sits at the window.
He looks out on ships at anchor in the bay,
Farmers selling vegetables from the back of their trucks,
Fishermen counting out their catch to the wholesalers
And as carefully counting the money they receive
In exchange. Stevedores stumble under their heavy loads.
Resting sailors sunbathing on the decks of their ships,
Play cards and sing tunes he can only remember or imagine.

Next to the bed is a night table with a water jug and two glasses.
A wet hand towel rests in a wooden bowl.
Next to the bowl are murky brown medicine bottles.

Pearl comes home:

She pulls out a bottle of red wine and pours him a glass.
She lies down next to him and lightly strokes his forearm.
He runs his hand gently over her breasts.
His bone-blond mustache is tinged red with wine.
His cheeks grow redder.
Her hand lifts up and runs over his lips, his nose, his eyes.

Panel 4: She meets her father's business associate in the hotel lobby.
Her hands are folded respectfully in her lap.
She is nervous and brushes back her hair from her eyes.
The pinched yellowing faces of the desk clerk and his cronies
Look on from the back. Will the girl crack?
It is not too late to come home, her father's friend tells her.
If her sailor cares for you, if he doesn't want to ruin your life,
He wants you to go. Return home now, this instant. No need to pack.
Your mother and father want everything left behind.
If you come back home, the whole world will be as brand new.
She shakes her head no. She has pledged her faith.
"There can be no joy in making love with a sick man.
You will die of the TB yourself!"
"He is getting better for sure," she affirms.
He might think that yes, this is possible, for there is no better
Medicine than love. This is an old wisdom,
Say what they will the forces of progress.
But he can say only half of what is in his heart.
"Ah, my daughter ... if you don't become sick,
It is only because God will punish you by making you a whore.
If you don't come home now, you will never know love."
She shakes her head no again. He picks up his top hat and walks out.
Her boy will not be left alone with the seagulls,
Memories of sailors songs, and his coughing.

She rubbed his naked body with wet towels. She sang him songs.

He tried to follow along despite his shivering and trembling,
Half from cold, half from terror. Those in the hall passing
To their rooms could hear their voices, hers strong, his weak.
Young love failed to cure him, but perhaps it blessed
His crossing over. After the burial, Pearl returned home.
Pearl was a “slave of love,” they said, finding a phrase
That explained everything they needed to know about her.

She ran off again. She married and divorced twice before she turned
Eighteen, looking for that perfect love the witch had promised her.
She married eleven or twelve times. Always to losers
—Musicians, drug addicts, alcoholics, deadbeats. A trumpet player
Took her to Havana and forced her into prostitution fulfilling the prophecy.
She contracted gonorrhoea without knowing it until infected ovaries
Burst. She would never have her own children. Love slipped
From her grasp. Until she found Jesus. He confirmed
Her faith had been a blessing. She need not fear.
All that had been torn apart would reunite.
She would earn the reward of pure love.

The final window in the chapel of her life:
Pearl, dying from cotton lung, bolts up in bed gasping.
Jesus riding a ray of light passes through the windowpane.
Jesus looks just like her sailor boy. He has blood all over him.
They kiss. Jesus’s blood fills her breath as they float away
Melting into each other. Her family never forgave
Pearl for being a whore. Still she returned and accepted their abuse.
After the funeral, we looked at pictures Pearl had saved. The young girl
Resurrected, standing by her slight blond boy. Two teenagers
Love had struck. The light they shared remained alive, shining,
Pearl of purity and grace carrying a prize formed in her heart.