

Catalog  
A Short Story Inspired by Sei Shonogan's Pillowbook  
Audrey Bernstein

### *Things I notice when I open the apartment door*

- Sunlight, cutting through the curtains and splayed on the carpet.
- My mother reaching for a trash bag.
- My father on the couch, snoring with a hand on his stomach.
- A broken beer bottle on the floor.

### *Broken things*

- Bottle glass.
- Our air conditioning unit.
- The skin of my mother's pinky finger, cracked open a slit while cleaning up the mess.
- My father's promise, two years ago: "Listen to me, Kid, I'll never go back." I was 13. He'd just gotten home from rehab. He smelled like fresh laundry and mint. He pressed a Hershey's Kiss in my palm and a real one on my forehead.

### *Unbroken things*

- The TV, pulsing in front of my father's sleeping face.
- The rhythm of seasons: The wet Florida spring, the heat brought by summer, wind in the fall, and hollow dark in winter.
- The seal on the tub of eye cream sitting in my mother's bathroom.
- The glossy black heels she bought three years ago and still hasn't worn.

### *Things I'm reminded of while my mother collects glass in a bag*

- The gray moth flitting against the window. My mother asks if it's the same one that was there last week, and I tell her I think so. It's been tapping at the glass for seven days.
- The time we gathered fuzzy white dandelions in our hands. My mother called them "wish flowers" and said we could ask for anything. I blew four separate times, one for each week my father had been away, and watched the seeds fly.
- The child by the beach who told her father she'd forgotten how to breathe. She sat on a bench, her tiny tummy inhaling and exhaling, begging her smart bald dad for the answer: "How do you breathe?" He laughed and said, "You're doing it right now, Sweetheart."

### *Questions I keep to myself while my mother collects glass in a bag*

- Will he ever get better?
- Why do you stay?
- How do you breathe?

### *Quiet things*

- A candle going out.
- My mother’s voice when I kneel down beside her and ask if I can help. She says, “it’s alright, Cami,” to the trash bag in her fingers. She knots it tight and her hands look small, so small. She asks what I’d like for dinner and my father opens his eyes and asks for pasta.
- Other quiet things: A sunflower growing. When I’m underwater and open my eyes and the algae sways and minnows dart and nothing at all makes a sound. Also, a sunflower dying.

### *Things that make me feel nostalgic*

- A parent’s voice played back on video—the kind where they’re behind the camera, saying something like “Smile, Sweetie!” “Show us your teeth!”
- A mother’s hand slick with lotion or hair gel or other pleasant-smelling creams.
- When the two main characters—preferably a man with darkened cheeks and a woman with long flowing hair—kiss.

### *Words I find myself repeating*

- Change. Change. Change change changechange changechange change. (No matter how many times you say it, the word sounds the same).
- Mother. Moth-er. Moth er. (I picture my mom tying trash bags while the dumb gray moth flits against the window, forgetting it belongs outside, forgetting the kitchen light is not the sun, forgetting it is already free.)

### *Things I notice walking from our apartment to the beach*

- The horizon is burnt with sunset pinks.
- A man in a fine-pressed shirt and glasses looks at me from his car, mid-yawn, and smiles softly. I imagine the words “Hey Kid” on his mouth until I can’t remember whether he actually said it.

- For a moment, I think of my father, of his prickly stubble, of him hiding bottles in his car. I think of my mother, of her frizzy hair and chapped lips, and how she pinches her skin purple every time he gets in the driver's seat.
- Insects dance in the humidity and prick at my skin.

### *Happy accidents*

- Wearing different colored socks.
- Typos.
- Opening the door to your parents laughing and smiling. You thought they weren't home. You all laugh, together.

### *Sad accidents*

- Spilled food or drinks.
- The time I passed by my mother's bathroom and heard her crying softly through the door.
- When, three months after rehab, my father hit the stop sign coming home from work. The car was barely dented, but he smelled like bourbon.

### *Lists I've made*

- Favorite eye colors. (Green's at the top).
- Things my father hates. (Cilantro. Slow walkers. Talking about rehab).
- Things I'm afraid of. (Feeling too hot or too cold. Seeing someone die. Eye contact.)

### *Lists I haven't made*

- Least favorite eye colors.
- Things my father loves.
- Things I want.

### *What I notice from the beach boardwalk*

- The smell of salt and the cool waft of waves.
- Two gray-haired women sharing a beach towel and eating something purple—maybe figs or grapes.

- The mansions lining the boardwalk, with windows so large I can see the people inside.

*People I see inside the glassy homes*

- A tall girl adjusting her dress in the mirror.
- A woman beckoning a golden retriever upstairs.
- A man with messy brown hair, washing his hands in his kitchen. He sponges and towel-dries a mug so tenderly I have to sit down. He fills it with a dark liquid that puffs with steam.

*Attributes of the woman who joins him in the kitchen*

- Long waves, held up in a red scarf.
- A dress that lands at her feet.
- Small hands that reach for his cheek like they're hoping for a kiss.
- She hangs her wrist delicately around his neck. He leans back and then she's cradling his round head, holding his face, and I wonder what it feels like to be cradled, to be held.

*Things I can't hold or have or know*

*Sensations when I jump into the ocean at night*

- The water is cold.
- My throat burns with salt.
- I think my nose is bleeding.

*Sounds when I return home from the beach*

- My father's snoring.
- Muffled TV voices.
- A running faucet.

*Things that are too close or too far (I can't decide)*

- The mansions by the beach.
- The messy-haired man and beautiful woman.
- Adulthood.

- My mother, standing by the sink, swirling plates in soap.

*Attributes of my mother while she washes dishes*

- Her hair stops in a blunt line at her shoulders.
- She smells like cotton.
- The skin under her eyes looks soft and tired. Occasionally, she closes her eyes for a few seconds, then opens them and continues scrubbing.

*Objects lining the windowsill*

- A bottle of soap.
- A plastic succulent.
- A dead gray moth, beneath a small opening in the window.

*Times I've seen my mother cry*

- When my father called her from the side of the road to say he'd hit a stop sign.
- When her mother passed away.
- When, at five years old, I left our apartment alone and walked toward the beach. An hour later, I saw her running towards me with tears in her eyes. She picked me up and kissed my forehead and said, through tears and laughter, "Cami, you're not an adult yet."
- Now. She wipes one slow tear from her cheek. She wraps the moth in a towel and opens the cabinet and realizes there is no trash bag in the bin. I get a bag from under the sink, unwrap it, and place it inside the trash bin. I take the towel-wrapped-moth from my mother's hand and gently toss it to the bottom. I take the sponge, too. The faucet runs warm over her empty hands. I let water spill over the dishes and wash them clean.

*Realizations, while my mother stands next to me over the sink*

- I can't remember the feeling of a hug in her arms, whether her skin is smooth or rough, whether her hands would be warm or cold, whether they'd shake or hold still.

*Something I'd like*

- To remember.