

Fairy Tales in Brooklyn

I come from a woman with a Coney Island tongue dipped in secrets.
You see, my mother blamed her vignettes on *the comet* and
the man who wore a hat in the shape of a crescent moon,
who told her that her life would be a long story,
most of it up a flight of stairs where
people would hide behind doors
when she asks for water, *and he was right*, she told me,
I thirsted till I found what I thought was love in your father's bed.
Strange, I know.
She told me about the ghost that leaned on her during the war.
Shrugged it off, thinking it was my father,
but it leaned twice, a third time on her shoulder,
so hard she almost was pushed into the window.
When she turned, she turned quickly, but no one was there.
A year later, she said, the entire building filled with smoke.
Firefighters couldn't find where it came from.
They broke through walls. No fire, just smoke.
She said the skylights turned black.
This scared the hell out of me when I was a child.
My mother told me other stories odd as tinsel
in a music box—people on a sidewalk outside a coffee cellar,
where, after he was gunned down by a passing car, a man fell to the ground
behind her. And there was a woman, a woman
behind the dead man, who said she was taking the ferry to Staten Island
to see a great aunt who lived in a large house with a daughter
who couldn't speak.
There's an orchard in the back yard. Apples,
all kinds of apples set upon by bats, the woman said.
One night years later, my mother

said she learned her best friend was that daughter.

I wasn't mute, her friend said,

and she burned her clothes in a bushel of fruit
the day of her first period. The dog, she said,
wouldn't leave her alone.

My mother once ran away in the fog to a hotel, her mother
on the roof playing piano surrounded by clouds and gangsters,
hard to discern in the mist, but she said

they all looked like my father. Must've been a dream, I think.

She talked to photographs when she thought she was alone,
ran from the room shaking when her dead uncle winked.

I never knew what to believe.

My older siblings were told the same fairy tales,
which is what I've always called them.

The last thing my mother told me was written
in a note I found after she died: *What happens in the sky*
happens on earth but we must sleep to see it. We must sleep to see it, she said.