

Somerville Girl – 1898

Lura Elliott, Somerville girl
Born on a chill December day 1886
With Dad and Mum and brother Fred
Kept the home on Lower Marshall Street #45 –
The city put the sewer in that year -
This house, now lopsided and gray, shingled in asphalt
Its three stories looming toward the street
Weary looking, as if all its inhabitants
>From the last one hundred years
Had drained away its soul -
And still the tall oak and taller Elm out back –

Winter 1898 was harsh; its bitter cruel cold
Froze the driver's gloves to the reins
Froze the horses' steamy breath to a needling mist
Turned lakes and ponds to frigid rock
And Boston Harbor to a chill slush
Tugboat prows causing the water to thicken like pudding
Blizzards poured their icy shroud into 12-foot drifts
Trolley trains skidded and derailed
100 horses gone in the wreckage
The SS Portland sunk off Cape Cod, 190 dead.

1898 went on to spring, with war declared
And Roosevelt charging up San Juan Hill
In the fall Admiral Dewey passed through Boston Harbor
By year's end the US won, the Spaniards finished at last.
The first auto policy was writ
The first automobile sold
Zola wrote "J'Accuse", Dreyfus was doomed
William Kellogg (preferred Bill) invented corn flakes
The City of New York was established
The Curies discovered radium

Brown beat Harvard in a first-ever Hockey match
Skating and sleighing were good all winter

And Lura and brother Fred did letters and sums
Memorized poems
Sang in the choir on Sunday
Studied the piano and learned to sketch
Went to Germans and dances
Bought gaiters and waists
Played the pennywhistle, danced the Maypole
And dreamt about bicycles or skates
April 20th: "I want a bicycle awful. War is all but declared."

*[And the waves of arriving Irish,
Leaving their shrunken desiccated fields,
And the English ships full of grain
And anchored in harbors on both coasts -
The Famine a myth, food at hand but not given -
Those children picked coal from rail tracks
And worked in factories]*

And Lura's Dad, they called him Boss Elliott,
Down at the Winter Hill Trolley Yard
1200 horses in his keep that winter
Their snorting and stamping feet filling the air
Amid the murmuring rough talk of the stable boys
Rubbing and smoothing down their strong muscles
The icy surface of the yard outside smooth and quiet and
still.

And for the Somerville girl, only a rare ripple in her
mannered days
*Jan 5: "Miss Emma Woodbury died at 11:30 A.M.
I drew a picture of Grampy which was pretty good".*
*March 6: We are not on good terms with Shaine's don't know how
it will end"*
In this life of obedience and order, of reticence and stillness
Of holding one's words in the mind
Carefully, like a butterfly in your mouth

Its dry wings beating against palate and tongue
Lura Elliott moved ahead through her days
Like a ball floating down a placid stream

I know she loved a boy 19, named Biney
His every word and visit embroidered in her journal
Lura Elliott loved him like only a young girl can
Dreaming with her heart sparkling like a pulsing star.
And she watched him from her window
July 4, 1898, setting fireworks and
Walking with her Aunt Abbie.
And then noted: "*Biney and Abbie are engaged* "
And never wrote his name again.

At 16 she walked every day up the grassy hill
To the brick High School with its Carnegie Library
Studied and graduated, smiling and beautiful
And silent in her wide-brimmed hat
[And I don't remember ever hearing her laugh]
At 22 working at the State House
Met Francis Oscar, governor's secretary,
And married late, at 28.
The War started soon after,
And Francis brought home a purple heart and
A collection of teapots from France,
And China, Japan, Russia and England
Places where people knew how to make tea
Teapots of stone, porcelain, gilt-edged, or glazed
And painted with flowers and birds
She had a swing on her porch
She had a leather chair from India
She had a book about the Nile
She had a tiger skin rug with its real head,
Green glass eyes and snarling yellow fangs
Shot by my uncle who went to Egypt
She made lobster stew
Took us swimming and gave us quarters
She enjoyed a glass of sherry
She wore hats to church

She drove an aqua blue Volkswagen bug
Was deaf at 60, backed into a ladder leaning
Against a phone pole and drove off
Never hearing the cries from the guy at the top.

In 1972 she wrote me in the South of France
Where I lived then, newly married,
Ensnared deep in the countryside
In a stone house 300 years old
Walking the lush fields every day
Breathing the air full of odors of plants and moss,
So green as to make me drunk,
So in love, and never thinking all that
Would turn heavy and sad
That I would soon hear words echoing hers:
*"I never thought," she wrote, "that I would live to hear
A President of the United States say, "I am not a liar".*
And I read her disgust in that short phrase -
The words spit out like a butterfly in her mouth -
And at 28 when it [*"I am not a liar"*] was spoke to me,
My heart tumbled into a dark earth pit
Where it lay, still and hard, for a very long time.

My Somerville grandmother, at 86
Expressing disappointment as if for the first time -
Oh, how I envied her then, envied her more than even
Her tiger skin rug with its green glass eyes and yellow fangs.

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About Bees

After the swollen flowers bequeath their pollen
After the combs are perfect waxy hexagons
And brim full, the bees die and the hives crumble.
The hives are dying in the autumn
This past summer, other deaths -
Warriors fallen in war
Children burned in war
Old men shot by the roadside
Women blown up in buses -
But the bees are also dying
What will we do if they -
There is nothing to replace them -
No other bumbled flyer wandering miles
No other flying innumerable
Loops, turns, curves and sweeps
No other to brush against
The thick yellow dust that sticks to their fuzz
No other to bring flowers and blooms to fruit
All the earth will shrivel perish until
One day we will have no water
[But first we will have no bees]
One day we will have no air
[But first we will have no bees]
One day we will have no future
[But first we will have no bees]

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Riding Dream

On a high plain I dreamed a hot wind long and dry
Pushing the sand moving everything like a wave
Burying everything - and nothing to eat but bugs and scrub
It had the smell of no soul it was an empty place
I was on the subway when I thought this
That was after a prayer
The one where I say God send me a poem
Oh ye of no faith oh ye of little faith
I write this because I have forgotten the other moments
I have forgotten the odor of you and the color of your skin
I have forgotten how your hands bunch up in anger
I have forgotten how the night howled and the sea cried
I have forgotten all these things -
But, if I were wise, if I were not still struck dumb by life
If I could put the glass on the table with a fist like iron
If I could see beyond the door that is closed
If the song was as smooth as a red silk dress
If I could raise my head from the table
And see the messenger in time
If I could find the right street corner
If I could write the letter make the dinner sell the apples
If I could if I could if I could. But I cannot.
I cannot open the door or make the song red silk smooth
I cannot write the letter or raise my head from the table
I never catch the messenger and it is always too late
And so I dream of the high plain the hot wind
The moving sand how it creeps into this dream
And I pray it to cover me and bury me
Far away from the smell of no soul.

- Julia Carlson