The Daughter Resurrected

Faith Gardner
The mother sat slumped on the beach’s chunky sand, daily, on a tattered rainbow blanket. She didn’t wear a two-piece. She didn’t toe the water. She didn’t read a novel nor care about the sunburn that worsened day by day, turning her the color of a crab.

She watched the waves spit, and waited.
Moved her lips and begged, begged the nothing.

On the third day, sun hanging low and moon looming whiter than the sky’s white, her daughter crawled out of the tide, seaweed tangled in her hair, skin periwinkle and waterlogged, veins highwaying her skin. Her dress was gaping with holes.

The mother stumbled across the sand and held her wet daughter close, shuddering. She blinked up at the clouds, watched the ocean uncertain whether to curse or kiss the ebbing. The foam left residue that reminded her of skeletal faces fading quickly into tidal sludge.

Her daughter said nothing. Her touch, it was icy, and her posture, it was slack.

The mother sobbed and drove the daughter home. The daughter dripped saltwater on the car seats and sat in silence, eyeing the trees that chopped by the passenger window with unblinking, bloodshot eyes. When the mother asked questions, the daughter vomited mud on her lap. The mother nodded, patting her daughter’s stocking-hole on her knee — freezing and slimy — and said, just rest. You don’t have to say anything. I’m just so glad you’re here.

At home, the daughter stood in the doorway until the mother nudged her inside. She had to be reminded where her room was, at the top of the staircase near the linens. The mother showed her daughter the pink bookshelves, daybed and kitten posters.
You don’t remember your room? the mother said.

The daughter sat on the edge of the bed and stared into the air.
The mother sat beside her. She picked seaweed chunks from her daughter's knotted hair. There was a lump in the mother's throat that felt real, a lump of words. She wanted to ask how it felt to drown, and where she went for three days. She wanted to ask the difference between the experience of being alive and not. Can I get you anything? she asked instead.
The daughter drooled brown sand.
The mother left her alone, went downstairs to reheat some food. She found an electric blanket in the garage. She googled "daughter drowned and rose from the sea."
Zero results.

The father had been sleeping in the attic at his mother's house when his daughter resurrected. The attic was a room with sloping wooden ceiling-walls lined with life-sized collectible dolls called Colonial Girls. Since the drowning, the father spent most his time lying in his mother's futon in her attic. The peanut butter plant had granted him leave. He stared at the many still faces of enormous porcelain dolls around him, for hours on end, and his lips buzzed like a word hovering, never to be said.

His house, the mere thought of it, provoked unbearable nausea. His wife — his daughter's mother — made him dizzy with her grief and her talk of grief. And there was always the question of blame. Of who had fallen asleep first on the beach that day — her or him? It was both unknowable and unforgiveable.

Only today his wife called him promising a giant surprise, singing, come home. She said, our daughter walked out of the sea. He mumbled something about psychiatrists. Beep, said the phone.

He sat up and stared at the dolls and put his hand up to his throat, feeling the bulge-bulge-bulge of a pulse. His mother came up the wooden ladder, making it creak.
She pointed to a doll with her pointing stick and said, this
is a child-like replica of Queen Victoria, isn't she exquisite? The father, her son, didn't say anything. He held his hand there on his esophagus and squeezed until his mother told him to stop it, stop it right now.

When he awoke from a nap they were standing there like a breathing family portrait: his daughter, pale as a dinner plate, violet, in fact, with bleeding-looking eyeballs that did not blink. She was wearing what her mother always called her "Easter dress." His wife, standing beside her, appeared thinner than he remembered. She wouldn't stop petting her daughter's pigtails, which hung limp and unwashed. Even though his daughter stood directly in the ray streaming through the skylight, there was no golden halo that lit her hair's frizz. Behind it all, in the shadows, beneath a line of Colonial Girls and white lace, his mother leaned on her cane and shook her head at him.

He stood up in a straight line and stared ahead at his daughter, who didn't blink. His face was stiff with nothing. All over, he felt zero, because this was not real. It couldn't be. He was safe, wandering a dream.

But when he knelt, and reached out to hold her hand, and felt the chilled dampness of her skin like a noodle, when he pressed it and her bird-like bones and unflexing hardness of her tissue, when he saw she was there in front of him, red-eyed and slack-faced, with not a blink and not a breath and not a word, he recoiled and stumbled backward into the futon legs. It was his own choking that convinced him he was alive and not dreaming; his daughter was dead but standing.

It took him several minutes to regain his breath.

The first few days, the mother would not leave her daughter alone. She tucked her into bed at night, where the daughter lay with wide,
unblinking eyes, her lips mum and shut and without breath. She did not sleep. The mother slept, snuggling cold flesh and blankets, and had vivid nightmares. The father slept in the other room, with the golden doorknob locked. When the mother awoke in the mornings, the daughter was where she had left her, only sometimes she was sitting up with her hands in her lap. If the mother said, “good morning,” then the girl would gurgle. The mother fixed her breakfast on a plate, but the girl only stared at it, and when the mother spooned scrambled eggs into her daughter’s mouth, she would not swallow. And there was sand in the regurgitated eggs.

The father, meanwhile, went back to work. I am very happy, he told everyone. A miracle has happened. I am just so happy. But at home, he didn’t let his daughter sit on his knee. He didn’t read her books or wash her hair. He waved hello and stared as long as he could at those red eyes before retreating into the bedroom with a drink or five. He had long, unmemorable dreams in empty, crooked worlds that starred a million blinking dolls.

Years passed like this. They celebrated birthdays with their daughter, but she didn’t seem to change. She wore the same sized dress. Her hair never grew, nor her fingernails. Her face was rigid and unmoved. And when she opened her mouth to say something, it was only silt and seawater that spilled.

The father grew fat, his hair whitened, and he left one day, taking only his pillow, his television, and the contents of his liquor cabinet. He moved back in with his mother, who had since moved the colonial dolls downstairs, where she drank tea with them and read them travel magazines about cities she’d not visited.

“I knew you’d be back,” she said to her son.
She poured him some tea. She seated a doll on either side of him. They had names and stories.
“I feel much better here,” he said.
He plugged in the television and turned it on, and they
didn't say much after that.

The mother worked harder, traded the house for an apartment. She bought her daughter dresses and books, but the daughter just stared at them in her lap like they were alien gifts. The mother did the math: her daughter would have been of prom age by now. But no. Here she was with her, undeveloped, still wet and ice-cold.

The mother watched her own face erode in mirrors, the gravity tug yearly at her cheeks and jowls, her hair shock, strand by strand, colorless. Arthritis bloomed in her knuckles. She was not the same woman who had loved the ocean, had stuck her feet in the dunes and laughed and watched her pink daughter play. She needed reading glasses now to see her daughter's face. And if she peered closely, squinted her wrinkled eyes at her creation, zeroed in on the story in her daughter's pupils, the hole in the middle of the red, she saw nothing, cool and dark and lonely. But why complain.

Look at her daughter, forever by her side, staring at the wall. She would never grow up. She would never go away. She was so lucky.