Broken Little Bluebird

Matt Mallard
I gaze at the middle of the table where the handcrafted ceramic bowl my Aunt Cindy made sits. She thinks in terms of acrylics and watercolors, as well as Homer and Faulkner. I am in awe of her range. She writes—poetry, mostly. She paints. She spins clay. I think, *I wouldn’t mind having a piece or two*, before I move back to the egg-beaters and bowl of egg-whites. *I will make you into frothy meringue, and you will be the best and frothiest meringue there ever was.* My father stands at the sink preparing the turkey; Cindy is at the oven, supervising the rotation of casserole dishes as a skilled, orchestra conductor.

One of us brings up Aunt Effie. Her story always intrigues me. The last time I remember her as a topic of conversation, Cindy told me, “You can have it if you want it, Matthew. I’ve tried to write about her for years,” though the only fruit she managed to yield were the pears in her painting above the dining room table. “I give it to you.”

As I spread the meringue over the bowl of banana pudding, I am suddenly aware of bowls. I imagine Aunt Effie’s husband sprinkling the rat poison over a
bowl of cottage cheese and peaches when he intended to kill her. I imagine her
dropping a bowl of buttered corn on the floor when she learned her siblings
tampered with their father’s will to write her out. I imagine her pouring water
from a porcelain pitcher into a basin in the 8’x12’ room she occupied at the
Elgin State Mental Hospital throughout her life. I imagine her blowing through
contoured lips on a simmering bowl of soup as she shared the bar with her
brother (my great-grandfather) and her great, great-nephew (my father) at a
cramped diner before she ventured back out into the bitter Chicago wind—her
entire life in a shopping cart.

I toss the dirty bowl in the sink, *Pudding’s done*, and smile at Aunt Cindy. She
threw the clay on the wheel for me; all I had to do was shape it, glaze it, bake it.
The Farm
(The speaker is Effie’s brother, my great-grandfather.)

Even before my sister married her first husband, our lives were plotted from a Cather or Steinbeck novel. Ellis Island welcomed our father from Denmark when he was 12. His family settled in Illinois, and he married a girl with similar roots. My parents survived the Depression with six kids on a farm, hidden from the dirt
highway by the towering stalks of corn,
their slender forms swaying in the

southwestern wind off Lake Michigan
like the last day I walked home from school

after quitting so I could work the farm.
I remember that farm, divided between

our four siblings after they finagled Papa’s will
[the land now victimized by sprawling suburbs].

I remember the unharvested corn, shining
like flutes of champagne

in the red and purple tones of dusk. Then
the night sky, brighter than all

of the downtown theatre marquee.
I remember how it felt to sit down
to a family dinner after a disheartening day
and pray, and be thankful
we were alive. But mostly, I
remember Effie’s smile as she
skipped from the pond, to
the woods, through the corn
twice her size, and up
to the front porch. I hoped
she’d always be as happy
as she was then.
Suspicion
(The speaker is Effie’s first husband.)

Piece of trash
they call me

Can’t keep a job
Good for nothing

Bad for Effie
maybe so, maybe I

spoon-fed her
rat-poison

laced lies, like
the light bulb

Hitchcock wired into the glass
of milk in Suspicion
maybe Effie knew
   I was in the business of delivering

light bulbs on a tray—
   she had time

to think about me
   when I left her

for dead,
   my bags waiting by the door,

her savings tucked away
   between button-ups, rolled trousers,

and a shaving kit
   The Ultimate Houdini:

/disappear/
   \reappear\

somewhere else
   as someone else.
Bluebird
(The speaker is Effie, my great, great-aunt.)

I am a broken little bluebird,
   tried to throw my hatchling          from the nest.
   That’s why I’m here.                        Again.
   In the mental hospital.                   [mad house]
Who tries to throw her daughter from a window?
   Madmen in the streets, in the towers,
   mental cases in the madhouses—
   the undisclosed side-effect of the American dream.

   Madmen follow brick roads, pace the towers.
   They think just because I’m in here, they’re safe
   from the side-effects. Americans dream
   to be talented, to be something special.

   But because I’m in here, they aren’t safe.
   All I wanted were the rainbows, the triumphant ending,
   but I had no talent; I wasn’t special,
   no Judy Garland, for sure.
   I want all the fuzzy voltage crashing/clanging in my skull;
   that’s why I’m here again.
   I’m no Dorothy Gale, though. Be sure,
I’m nothing—just a crumpled, silly, mad little bluebird.
The Diner
(The speaker is Effie’s 10-year-old great-nephew, my father.)

I picked and pried at the cracked, hard, laminate counter. It glared its red eyes back at me like the woman on the other side of my grandfather. She scared me a little. Grandpa had said

_You may not recognize her, she probably won’t recognize you, but keep your head._

_It’s still Effie._ Two years ago, Aunt Effie baked enough Christmas pies to feed all of Chicago. This was not the same woman. I’d been misled.

Her shell’s gaze met my eye, and I believed to see a small thread of familiarity. Huddling into her coat, threads unraveling, she dismissed me with a sigh.

To her, I wasn’t any different from the strangers in the corner booth; she’d

_forget me just as soon as she started to like me._ Pancake platter drenched in syrup and a refill from the waitress [sandpapery voice and funny makeup], she tried to clamp a cigarette between her cherry lips while asking if we were well-fed.
Effie neglected her shopping cart outside long enough to bow her head in her plate, never looking at her brother, even when he almost cried for her distressing situation, for her crushing circumstances, for the life she might have led.

Instead, back out the door, away from the security of the diner, to the streets—dead and devoid of any distinction between right and wrong. I weighed the different sides of blind justice that night: on one end, I recalled the parable of Job I had read, the other was Aunt Effie, stalking away in the direction of the park, Hershey’s and energy bars in tow, as if nothing with her brother had been left unsaid.