

To See Who's There

by Nonnie Augustine

Able to search through centuries, I click, scribble, skim,
resurrect wet stone walls, the smell of burning peat.

Bob's your uncle; Peggy's your aunt.

Name your family, child. My brother said hello
to Uncle Shirley and Aunt Greg. I was more careful.

Census workers list the immigrants who have an address, have
standing.

Where was your father born? What can you do? What will you do?

Dad wouldn't go to Mass and so would go to hell. I knew the rule.
Infants who die unbaptized are trapped in Limbo until Judgment

Day

when the dead arise, when the world ends. Monstrous
possibilities

taught to children. Long before I miscarried, I'd wrenched free.

Eulalie Routhier, baptized at Saint-Eustache, Deux-montagnes,
Quebec, 1847. My fruitless ovaries have shriveled to nothing—
my habit of naming children lives on. "Eulalie"

Four years of high school French, three of Spanish,
to bring me closer to Europe, to the family past?

The summer I turned twenty-one, I flew to Spoleto,
danced in operas at the Festival dei Due Mondi,
swirled language in a frothy entertainment for the Italians.

Grandfathers swallow surnames of the Catherines and Elizabeths,
and so I hunt. Mademoiselle Blaison de Paris led to Spanish

sonneteers,

humanists, and conquistadores. Oh, to be named Blaison de Paris!

Hell-bent on survival, my Irish joined the million who left.

Another million stayed to die, having no luck at all.

Íñigo Lopez de Mendoza retired to his castle in Guadalajara,
La Mancha, Castille, in 1455 upon sweet Catalina's death.

They married in 1410, she just 12, he 14.

45 years of devotion—I know this in my bones.

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Jeremiah, Johnny, Johan, Jakob,

"James James

Morrison Morrison

Weatherby George Dupree

Took great

Care of his Mother,

Though he was only three."

My mother's mother, my Nonnie,
gave me A.A. Milne in her lovely voice.

K-n-i-s-e-l, read, then said, kin-eye-zul, correctly, by a few.

Great-grandfather Adolph Gustav came to Amerika,
married Johanna Otilie, who bore Charles Adolph
who fathered Bob who married Ditty,
and so young Bobby, Peter, Ricky, and me.

Lovers, kiss on the immigrant ship.

Live through night's roiling danger.

Let's say I've made her up.

Let's say I've written with authority.

Let's say this is all fiction, all fact.

My mother never spoke of her childhood, even to me.

Her mind fastened on quotidian worries, let them loose only
near the end when, losing pounds willy-nilly,
she ate chocolates and cheesecake, quietly.

Otilie Augustine left Trieste before James Joyce arrived. Besides
he had his Nora. "Tillie," dead since 1933, visits me at my desk.

Poisoned in Dieppe

beheaded in Winchester

killed in the Battle of Flodden Field,

but not before they sired children. What luck!

Quarantine: from Italian quarantina from quaranta, "forty:"

Sick family in a pesthouse, far from town, near a cemetery or
waste pond.

Ragôût, der Eintopf, el estofado, stobhach, stirabout, stew.

Settle on the banks of the Shannon, Loire, Neckar, Henares,
Loch Doon; on the Île d'Orléans in the St. Lawrence River.

Commingle in the great city on the Hudson, make families, make me.

Typesetter, cooper, mill worker, farmer, beggar, sculptor, soldier, abbot, king, at home looking after the children, knight, saint, maid, countess, poet, cook, milliner, opera singer, piano teacher, carpenter, politician, lumberjack, dancer.

Under quilts, canopies, the stars, in privileged privacy
or with your children sleeping on pallets nearby, with passionate hands

pulling him in, in, with crying out or whispered caress, with fear.

Vainglorious Gilbert.

Waltheof's widow, knowing remorse
like nobody's business, built one abbey,
two churches and raised Maud, who became a saint.

X is the mark you make on the line. Beneath it the priest writes
"Catherine McCarthy." You admire the curves, loops, ups and
downs.

Patrick Kennedy is your husband now; he'll take you to America.

You might be my cousin. When you smile, your eyes might crinkle
so much they nearly disappear like Aunt Elsie's, like mine.

You might have tiny arteries, a yen to sing opera,
a tendency to be gullible, the gene for alcoholism.

Zealous, hungry, the orphan Claude Robillard
is thirteen when he boards the Ste. André in 1663,
nineteen when he claims his own land in New France,
chops down a tree, another and another *dans la sombre forêt*.

