

To See Who's There

by Nonnie Augustine

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Able these days to search through centuries, I click,
scribble, cut and paste, skim, reject, record, resurrect
a wet stone wall, the smell of burning peat.

Bob's your uncle, Peggy's your aunt.
Name your family, child. My brother said hello
to Aunt Greg and Uncle Shirley. I was more careful.

Census takers listed the immigrants
once they had addresses, once they had standing.
Where were you born? Where was your father born?
Your mother? What can you do? What *will* you do?

If a Catholic infant died unbaptized they went to Limbo until
Judgment Day.

My Scots switched sides, switched back. Lost their land, kept
their heads.

Dad stopped going to Mass and so would go to hell.
I believed in this monstrous possibility once.

Emily Brontë's moors rolled from the window seat in my upstairs
room in Ramsey, New Jersey. I knew the wet air,
the low purples, greens, browns; the heavy skirts, his shadow in
the doorway. I curled in nooks, inglenooks.

Eulalie Routhier, baptized at Saint-Eustache,
Deux-montagnes, Quebec, in 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,
so when I went to Spoleto the summer I turned twenty-one
I swirled languages into a frothy entertainment for the Italians
while I danced in operas, unwound with Chianti.

Grandfathers swallow the surnames of Catherines and
Elizabeths.

My compulsive clicking tracks them down. Blaison de Paris,
led me to Spanish sonneteers, humanists, and *conquistadores*.

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, Castile, when Catalina died in 1455.

She was twelve, he fourteen, when wed in 1410.
I'm certain of their devotion.

Jeremiah, Johan, Jakob, Johnny,
James James
Morrison Morrison
Weatherby George Dupree
Took great
Care of his Mother,
Though he was only three.
My mother's mother, my Nonnie,
sang A.A. Milne to me. Her lovely voice.

Knisel, Kneissl, Kneisel, Kneissel, Kin eye zul. Great-grandfather
Adolph Gustav came to America, married Johanna Otilie, (everyone
called her "Tillie")

who bore Charles Adolph, who fathered Robert Arnold
who married Doris Joan, who bore my three brothers and me.

Lovers, kiss on the immigrant ship.

Live through the nights of roiling dark.
Let's say I've made her up.
Let's say I've written about him 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,
loosened from them only at the end,
when, losing pounds willy-nilly,
she ate chocolates and cheesecake, quietly.

Ottolie Augustine left Trieste
before James Joyce got there.
Anyway, he had his Nora.

Poisoned in Dieppe,
beheaded in Winchester,
killed in the Battle of Flodden Field,
but not before they sired children. What luck!

Quarantine: A state, period, or place of isolation in which people or animals that have arrived from elsewhere or been exposed to infectious or contagious disease are placed:

*"many animals die **in quarantine**"*

*Mid 17th century: from Italian *quarantina* 'forty days', from *quaranta* 'forty'.*

*A **pest house**, **pesthouse** or **fever shed** was a type of building used for persons afflicted with communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera, smallpox or typhus. Often used for forcible quarantine, many towns and cities had one or more pesthouses accompanied by a cemetery or a waste pond nearby for disposal of the dead.*

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

Settle on the banks of the Liffey, Loire, Neckar, Henares,
Loch Doon, on the Île d'Orléans in the St. Lawrence.
Converge in the city on Hudson Bay, 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, dancer,
lumberjack.

Under quilts, canopies, the stars, in privileged privacy,
with your children sleeping on pallets nearby, with passionate
hands
pulling him in, in, with crying out, whispered caress, with fear.

Vainglorious Gilbert.

Waltheof's children
watched when
they chopped
off his head
in Winchester.

X is the mark you make on the line the priest points to. He writes
Catherine McCarthy and you admire the curves, loops, ups and
downs.

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, desperate, the orphan boy 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, another *dans la sombre forêt*.

