

# Genealogy

by Sarah McKinstry-Brown

*(For my daughter)*

*Genetic factors appear to play a significant role in alcoholism and may account for about half of the total risk for alcoholism.*-The New York Times, July 9, 2011

You are an heiress to drunks.  
The statues of your forefathers stagger,  
memorialized by gravity, their faces  
eternally half-lit, as they reach into refrigerators  
for another something  
to keep away the cold empty.  
I am sorry for the stories  
unfolding in your blood, especially  
the ones that could end with you, 16  
18, 20, 40, stranded  
in your body, looking for messages  
in bottles of Heineken, Pabst, Blue Moon,  
or Jack Daniels. By the time

I figured out that whiskey made me angry,  
I was overseas, away,  
kicking my fallen best friend in the ribs,  
pleading in the dark, screaming street,  
*Why can't you just be a man?* That was my first  
real lesson in addition and subtraction.  
I vowed afterward

to only drink the clear stuff, to stay  
away from anything amber—no more bourbon, rum,  
marigolds, Wurlitzers, Monarch butterflies, Raymond Carver.  
No more sunrises, or sunsets, no more Tom Waits or slow burning  
fires. No more long walks in November. Sorrow

is when you're afraid to love anything that glows,  
is when you believe that any kindness is a sniff  
of raw meat, a dab of honey baiting  
the trap. Before your father was your father,  
he came to my front door with flowers, and my heart sank,  
I sneered, *What do you want from me?* that fragrance,  
an anchor, dropping me right back

into my mother's kitchen  
her eyes fixed on the vase stuffed with lilies, a plea  
for her to keep quiet about last night, last week,  
and all the ones before it. Mom's taste  
in men, her love for all things broken  
taught me metaphor. Around our house,  
poems wrote themselves

*Love is a busted dead bolt on the front door.  
Regret  
is the next morning, those same hands shaking  
as he mends the broken chain on your blue bicycle.*

Or maybe it's the other way around. Maybe  
regret is the busted dead bolt, and it's love,  
that's the shaking hands. I can never seem to keep it  
straight. And this is why, Daughter,

I am writing to you from all these years away,  
to tell you I am glad I learned to take flowers  
from your dad, that no gesture  
is empty, and that, while my father waltzed with his guilt  
and my mother, her fear, the two of them  
spinning and spinning,

I held my breath, a bright penny,

tight in my fist, my hands at my side,  
which is why, sweet daughter, now  
that I've arrived decades later, with my life still  
intact, I am giving you  
this.

