



6 MICRO-MEMOIRS

Beth Ann Fennelly

A Study of Reading Habits

When I was a girl with a book in my hand I could go to a place so deep no one could follow. No one cared to, except my mother, an affectionate woman who smarted at her lack of companionship. She must have felt bereft to watch me sink beneath the surface. She must have stood on the shore and wrung her hands, the retreating waves eroding the sand beneath her feet grain by grain by grain. She must have looked to the horizon and seen her own dear daughter gone from her, even the long dark locks, eel-graceful, succumbing.

Sometimes, in the deep, I'd hear an echo for a long time before I recognized what I'd been hearing: my name. My mother, calling my name.

Yes, Mom? I'd ask, lifting the globes of my eyes.

It's time to set the table, Honey.

Okay.

I'd place the book belly-down and rise, though I could see (we both could see) dinner was still a good way off.

I don't go in so deep anymore. Can't, in fact. I suppose, over the years, my body grew too used to being hauled into the oxygenated air, my lungs grew less capacious. Also, I'd begun to hear the voices from the surface so distinctly. Now, I'm hooked the first time they call my human name.

The Coming of the Coming of Age

We were vacationing on a small lake in Canada. I'd walked the pineneedle path to the store, the kind of place lichened with shingles, bell on the screen door, bowl of water for the store dog. The kind of place that sold a bit of everything, beef jerky and buttons and shoe polish and fly paper. I cased the tiers of candy. I was six, would have been happy eating nothing but Pixy Stix and Pop Rocks and Bottle Caps. Lik-M-Aid Fun Dip and candy cigarettes that gave a puff of chalky sugar.

Waiting in line, I felt a hand settle onto my head: the woman behind me, conversing with the clerk. She began stroking my hair. I waited, obedient, patient, to pay, and the woman continued chatting and stroking, rhythmically, unhurriedly, my hair an instrument she strummed to lyrics about summer traffic, worse than last year, eh? And did you hear Mary's eldest is moving home?

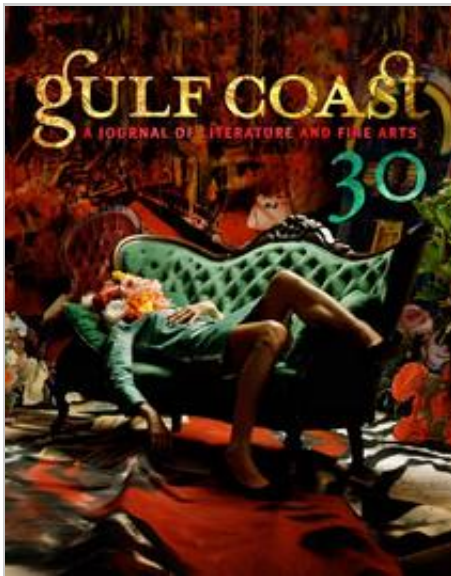
Then it was my turn, and as I addressed the clerk, the woman behind snatched her fingers back as if they'd been scorched. "Oh!" she cried, and I turned. "I'm sorry, I'm terribly sorry! I thought for a minute you were my daughter!" I gazed at her, surprised only at her embarrassment. Of course she'd want to pet me.

Diet of nothing but sweetness, expectation of nothing but affection. You can imagine what this world would make of me.

Expiration Date

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Beth Ann Fennelly directs the MFA Program at the University of Mississippi where she was named Outstanding Teacher of the Year. She's won grants from the N.E.A., United States Artists, and a Fulbright to Brazil. Fennelly has published three books of poetry and one of nonfiction, all with W. W. Norton, and a novel co-authored with her husband, Tom Franklin. They live in Oxford with their three children. She's currently finishing a collection of micro-memoirs.



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