

# I am from stories

I am from stories shared at Thanksgivings bigger than Christmas  
tables decorated with pickled herring  
descendants of Danish immigrants piecing together tales handed down  
three generations and counting

Stories of my father's grandmother, a teenage girl who didn't want to leave her island home  
a girl who turned her back in anger as the ship left port, and always mourned the loss  
of her last goodbye  
who found work at a Luck, Wisconsin, boardinghouse, where a guest became her husband  
a man who had survived a shipwreck, who begged God to save him  
who, with bitterness and a refusal to learn English, became a minister, and passed down poverty  
to his ten children

I am from stories  
of my mother, a girl making hollyhock dolls in her grandmother's Victorian garden  
a woman road tripping through the Nevada desert in her overheating Pontiac  
of my father, a boy throwing rocks at snakes in Chicago's South Side vacant lots  
a man playing Bach on his gleaming black grand piano  
both born into the Thirties, learning to use every corner of a paper towel, wishing for  
money to buy a book

I am from my own stories  
of rigging a pulley system with my best friend, and passing notes in a box  
between our bedroom windows  
pressing the mute button, my brother and I speaking for six siblings in *The Brady Bunch*  
riding a white horse named Queen at a Colorado dude ranch  
traveling far, to birds in cages suspended from Beijing park trees, girls in ruffles selling pies at a  
Guanacaste rodeo, icons bright with gold stacked to ceilings in Novgorod cathedrals

I am from a girlhood weaving stories  
while watching Lake Michigan's frigid water inch toward my toes  
breathing the lake's sweet, earthy damp  
listening to leaves swish above my backyard  
on a brick road of arching maples  
imagining the secret lives of people I barely knew

Now, I rise early, still half in my dreams  
letting them lead and surprise me through words on a page  
afternoon joy in improv games with my daughter  
aromas of my husband's pecan pie from scratch  
peace of creativity radiating from my head and heart

I am from stories of hardship and becoming  
accidents and sickness  
heartbreaks and loves  
plans upended, landing me on unexpected paths  
to find my feet again  
my family, my circles, my self

— Karen Jersild





