

Daffodil Lesson
Atopia Antholozine, 2010

I was curious and childhood-fond of the woman who lived next door to us while I was growing up, the mother of the friend I played with for endless hours of our mutual childhood. I was intrigued not just because she was nice to me and gave me slices of cake, later on when I was a teenager, my first taste of strong black coffee; she was also different from my family and from anyone else I knew at that early part of my life. She was a devout Catholic (one Christmas Eve I got to stay up late and go with her to midnight mass). She was Croatian – descendant of a small, exotic sounding country in south-central Europe that I could barely find on a map – which gave her features and skin color and swear words that were unique in my experience. She had a mysterious sister I never met because her Agoraphobia made her afraid to ever leave her house.

Unlike my mother, who was more casual about housekeeping, she vacuumed her carpets every single morning. I would hear the mechanical hum of it early on days when it was warm enough to have doors and windows open. Sometimes I would sit by myself on our front porch in the warming sun, her early-morning household ablution one of the only sounds.

Daffodils. Not too terribly much shorter than me, that particular spring, maybe just under half my height. So many of them, so bright. A huge river of sunny yellow all along the flower bed at the side of the garage. I could pick one and it would fit in my hand, stem smooth and yet sturdy enough for my tiny, eager grasp. I had watched my mother plant the bulbs, working in the garden on her knees, bent in concentration and wearing the mid-calf pants that in the 1950s were known as “pedal pushers,” sleeveless turquoise-and-white-checked gingham shirt that she had sown herself.

To this day my mother remembers that spring; I daily picked and delivered next door my gift of daffodils, one or two at a time. Usually later in the day, after the vacuuming was done, when she was drinking coffee in her kitchen or busy in her own back yard. By the time my mother realized my generosity, there were none left for her to see out the window while she did the dishes, or to cut and bring inside and put in a vase on her kitchen table. But she wasn't angry, understanding that I was just being enthusiastically kind and well intentioned. There had been so many of those bright yellow blossoms, it seemed to me, I was as surprised as she was that I could have possibly gifted away all of them. I felt bad for my mother, guilty, torn in the rightness and wrongness of giving. But she smiled and said it was okay to give some, just please leave enough so we could have some to enjoy, too, and just to be more careful next spring.