SHE TOOK OFF HER WINGS AND SHOES

Fortune appears in many forms—as the goddess, Fortuna, capricious in her gifts; a slip of paper in a cracked cookie; a roulette wheel in a casino; a pap smear report; an eviction notice; dreams and turns in life recorded in a journal without knowing what will fill the pages that follow.

I

Ill Fortune

The chance happening of adverse events, the turns of luck in the course of one’s life

Over the phone, I ask to speak to my mother. The woman at the other end of the line tells me there is no one there by that name and hangs up.

Living off credit cards.

You seek to shield those you love and like the role of provider.

I hear bats squeaking in the walls. One flies out of my closet.

My parents meet on my father’s leave from the Merchant Marine. My father stands on the beach in shorts and sunglasses. He must be looking at my mother who holds the camera. He smiles a quiet smile, not a smile for the camera but at something my mother says or the way she looks.

We were evicted for the second time. The landlord kept banging on the door most of the night. We moved in with relatives living in an arboretum on Long Island. A former Vanderbilt estate stared from across the river. When I wandered over the grounds, I was on an English country estate surrounded by every type of tree collected from world travels. The rhododendron hedges were much taller than me. And, it always rained, like it does in England. The mansion in the arboretum had a gingerbread façade, cross-hatching in shades of brown, the carriage house connected to the house with an archway over the circular drive, the house a museum, now.
Stuffed birds perched on their pedestals, others ready for flight.

**A friend is a present you give yourself.**

The cot is narrow and rickety. Its metal ends are cold against my skin. I learn to sleep on it without thinking about how thin it is, how I could fall out at any time.

She is associated with the bounty of the soil.

**You will inherit a large sum of money.**

Shots fired outside our apartment. A car on fire. I wake to a fire engine’s red lights revolving on the walls in my bedroom, my husband asleep beside me.

She guides the vessel’s course with a rudder.

The sun came back today. A pine smell rises from the spot where the city burns Christmas trees, a blackened circle.

My mother isn’t working and lives in a homeless shelter.

The grass grows taller and taller, taking over the yard, the woman who lives upstairs puts a red light in her window, her boyfriend beats her. My mother disappears for two weeks. The social worker visits us and talks to my mother, watching me from the corner of her eye.

The man stretches his hand just beyond the shower curtain and meows like a cat. My screams echoing beyond the falling water, scare him away. I can clearly see his hand, a hard-working, middle-aged hand, the stubby fingers, the dirt in the cracks along his palms, a long life-line.

No one believes me. My aunt turns away from me toward my mother saying, “She made this up to get attention.”
Fortune is light-fingered in her ability to take back again; she has many hands.

You can consult her about the future.

At twenty years of age the will reigns; at thirty the wit; at forty the judgment.

He runs his hands along me as I bend over to pick up a leaf. I stand up and turn to confront him, and he is laughing. I can see his hand holding a drink, the ice swirling and melting in a clear liquid, distorting the lines of his palms. He turns and goes back into the kitchen with the other adults.

I'm living in my aunt's house and he is her in-law. If I tell, I see my mother and myself shoved out into the snow drifts.

Working at a library after school, I sometimes take a late school bus home after work. Only a few teenagers are on the bus racing up and down the steep hills formed by a glacier. I walk home down the dark, steep, icy hills. My mother helps me with my homework. She manages to buy Christmas presents and get a Christmas tree every year.

I take my paycheck out of my pocket and put it on the table. My mother hands it back and tells me, "Buy some clothes for yourself."

Your principles mean more to you than any money or success.

The landlady kept coming by the apartment, asking to speak to my mother. My mother told me to wait in the bedroom. They talked about paying the rent and drank coffee my mother served. After a few visits, a notice was tacked onto the door.

The bat clings to the ceiling beam, circles over my bed around and around me, then flies out the bedroom door. The intricate web of pipes is exposed. There isn't a drop ceiling.
You will be traveling and coming into a fortune.

The wind blows up against the corners of the building. I can hear it out the window.

The path runs along a stream covered by a canopy of trees so thick it’s difficult to see the sky. Sunlight enters only in patches. I play in certain trees, and on Sundays I fake being too sick to go to church so I can walk through the woods with my father who tells me the names of the plants and trees we pass: willow, birch, oak.

Similarly, fortune catches us on limed twigs, or snares us as if we were birds. We flutter in the air until attracted by the luring branches and then get stuck in the lime. Once captured, she puts her bridle on us.

He plants a garden at the back of the yard. Carrots, squash, scallions, pumpkins, tomatoes, and cucumbers. He weeds and waters for hours. Dirt is ground into the knees of his overalls; a pungent smell reaches me as he stands up. He pulls up carrots and scallions, washing them with the hose, letting me eat them.

My mother comes home early from work, quitting her first job after the divorce. She explains, as she takes off her coat, her scarf, her boots, how she told her new boss the drive to work was too far in the snow. I am eleven and yelling at her.

Your car will be trouble-free for the next 40,000 miles.

The prostitute lives in the basement of our building and has nowhere else to go.

Hanging upside down, she pulls her papery thin wings around herself. She falls asleep in a dark corner, pulsating like a heart.

My grandmother led my mother to a convent that took in homeless girls. Her sister and brother were sent to a different place.

I dream my mother and I are in a nearly empty house. I’m in what was my room with a box of family photographs. My mother comes into the room and begins to go
through the box. I know she'll start ripping them up, so I grab them from her and decide to lock them in my trunk.

**People find it difficult to resist your persuasive manner.**

In another dream, a high school friend with long red hair is telling me it's time to say good-bye. She's very businesslike about it. They split the money they get for the house, and divide up the furniture. Some things stay in the house for the new owners: the piano, dollhouse, an antique sewing machine. The judge agrees each child is worth $100 in support and orders my mother to work. She has not worked outside the home for twenty years.

And there is no rudder, no crew member at the helm.

There is finally a term for her: displaced homemaker.

As I looked out the picture window, I imagined all our things on the lawn for everyone to see. I pulled out a box and began packing dishes as if I'd done this many times before. My father showed up the next day to help us move with a truck and his girlfriend. She was wrapped in a fur coat.

**You will participate in a gala affair.**

I am looking at the three dresses I can wear to the party and trying to decide which one is the least worn.

Furniture and smaller belongings get left behind during all stages.

The other people in line at the grocery store don't notice we're using food stamps that look almost like money but have the smaller size and papery sound of play money and come in bright colors. Everyone looks annoyed about waiting for the cashier to mark the stamps and then ring up food and nonfood items separately. Welfare will
not pay for nonessential items: soap, toilet paper, detergent. The clerk looks harried as the line grows longer, she shoves the groceries into bags, turning to the next person. We pretend not to notice.

I hide beneath the quilt as the bat swings toward me, circling around and around me and diving toward my face.

**One learns most when teaching others.**

I help her carry the grocery bags through the parking lot, across the highway, then down the tree-lined street.

**Good things are being said about you.**

I forget about the world surrounding the arboretum, the highways, feeling shy at school, the clapboard houses and streets where trees have all been cut down. I watch for ghosts near the mansion, the man whose cape is an extension of the way he moves off into the snow. I walk out onto the frozen river. The snow is really a carpet, the marble mantle over the mahogany fireplace where a fire blazes surrounded by cherry furniture, elegant landscape paintings, portraits of ancestors in long gowns descending the stairs. You must walk softly here, make little noise if you don't want the house to disappear.

**Your mind is creative, original, and alert.**

Those cabinet shelves of china will not be passed down to me, the blue plates with patterns of people harvesting sheaves of wheat.

I wear loosely fitting clothes so no curves show. I don't talk to boys.

The realtor, wearing a suit, brings a couple and child through the house. The couple exclaim I am the same age as their child, that my room must be a very nice room for a little girl to have. Then they notice the sign I put up about not touching my toys. They move to another part of the house.
Later, my father squats down next to me, and in his soft voice tells me to take down
the sign.

**Your happiness is intertwined with your outlook on life.**

After a while, my friends stop calling me.

She is depicted with a rudder.

The water in the river keeps moving and emptying into the bay. Large houses line the
river, boats docked nearby. Geese honk above the trees in the gray sky, in the gray
branches.

The furnace keeps turning off in the middle of the night, snow clings to the
windowsills. My mother goes outside in her nightgown, out the front door, around to
the back of the house, then down the basement steps to switch it back on.

II

**Leap**

*Used for effecting horizontal
changes in course*

The gynecologist and the nurse discuss wallpaper selections for the new office.

I feel a pulling high up in my endocervical canal. The local anesthetic is not
working. I can feel the tissue being looped then yanked from my cervix.

It is so painful even a scream isn’t possible, as if that were ripped from me, too.

I am not really here in this wallpaperless room.

The infertility and incompetent cervix issues had been discussed.

**Judge not according to the appearance.**
It hurts to walk, and I am trying not to cry in the waiting room as I wait for my boyfriend to pick me up. The doctor told me it would be a simple and painless procedure, so I told my boyfriend he didn’t need to wait. I wait for him, the ball of pain widening as a pregnant woman stares at me, and the women on the health channel chatter at us from the large-screen TV.

Your efforts are budding.

The uterus itself is anteverted and firm without palpable adnexal masses or tenderness. Actually, fairly normal in appearance, a little ectropion, consistent possibly from where the recent Loop Electrosurgical Encision Procedure (LEEP) was done, but not as distorted as I might have thought.

You will have good luck in your personal affairs.

I am staring at the poster on the ceiling. Another doctor comes into the room and heads to where my legs are apart. He is here to observe the procedure. I am not numb enough.

There are many new opportunities that are being presented to you.

Fortune’s house is often on a towering rock.

Abnormal cells are present in this specimen and are consistent with mild dysplasia. Red blood cells present. Endocervical cells present.

Return in six months following the pap if this one is normal.

The waiting room could be some woman’s room, pink wallpaper, baskets of fake flowers, women’s magazines. The cervix is pink.

[80]
You must learn day-by-day to broaden your horizon.

Her worldly possessions rest on a shaky foundation and are exposed to the winds of adversity, which naturally she could suffer.

I had to go somewhere else. It gets easier. It hurts to have sex. I'm afraid it will hurt every time. I am not supposed to ask questions about what will happen.

Endo/Exocervical component.

You may attend a party where strange customs prevail.

No show for follow-up pap.

We did find abnormalities on your recent pap smear. You should consult your doctor concerning the significance of these abnormalities and what further investigation or treatment he would advise.

End of report.

Atlantic City
A large sum of money

Fortuna bears a cornucopia as the giver of abundance and a rudder as controller of destinies or stands on a ball to indicate the uncertainty of fortune. A capricious dispenser of good and ill fortune.

In Caesar's Palace the slot machines whirl and clang all along the ballroom floor, huge crystal chandeliers above. My mother has an uncanny way of finding the ones that give money.
Among her monuments was a temple at Argos, where the legendary Palamedes is said to have dedicated to her the first set of dice, which he is supposed to have invented.

Sometimes her eyes appear, and very expressively, as when one of them weeps and the other laughs.

A colonnade of plaster Romans circle us as we take a snapshot outside the casino. They gesture toward the flat golden doors—Caesar welcomes us over the loudspeaker, "Come this way."

Drug deals are going on as I walk up the steps of the shelter to see my mother. It's warm, humid, the salt smells of the ocean mingled with cigarette smoke. My mother peers out of her room before coming out. For a second, I glimpse a single light bulb hanging from a ceiling, an unmade bed, some plastic grocery bags. A stray cat follows us down the long hallway.

Her frailty is like glass. Her face may smile, but she stings just the same, and resembles a serpent or (even better) a scorpion.

There is a long wait for the elevator. Elderly people wait on walkers, lean on canes, sit in wheelchairs.

**Walk through life with a good heart, and you will run with success.**

Originally a farming deity, she eventually represented luck. She came to be identified with Tyche, the patroness of cities and goddess of fortune among the Hellenistic Greeks.

A bat boomeranging beneath a street lamp swooping to grab a moth or insect.

The method could be simple, such as the casting of lots or the rustling of tree leaves, or more sophisticated, taking the form of a direct inquiry of an inspired person who then...
gave the answer orally. One of the most common methods was incubation, in which the inquirer slept in a holy precinct and received an answer in a dream. Oracles delivered through incubation were believed to come from underworld powers.

Consultants slept on skins.

She took off her wings and shoes, since she intended to remain there.

I invoke you here.

**He who has imagination without learning has wings but no feet.**

My sister’s old apartment building on the boardwalk has been turned into a haunted house. I used to walk her dog here, along the beach, the dog disappearing in and out of the early morning fog, running into waves of fog, waves of ocean.

No mere “Lady Luck,” she was the energy that drove men and women to reproduce themselves. Fortuna was originally “she who brings,” the goddess who permitted the fertilization of humans, animals, and plants; thus she was worshiped by women desiring pregnancy and gardeners seeking bumper crops. The goddess who made women irresistible to men, who was worshipped by a regular invasion of the men’s public baths by luck-seeking Roman women.

Someone runs yelling up the stairs.

We go to a casino buffet for dinner. An abundance of food is everywhere, a whole dessert bar, fruit bar, but my mother’s face is drawn and thin, and her impulse is still to mother me and tell me to eat more. A cornucopia spills fake flowers, fake fruit.

**For better luck you have to wait ’til autumn.**
IV

Good Fortune

One who has good fortune, especially a wealthy person. A person’s condition or standing in life determined by material possessions or financial wealth.

I pass by the photographs of other women who went to this college in the nineteenth century. In one photo, rows and rows of women study together underneath candles at long tables. In another photo, they wander over these same brick paths through campus.

In the dream, the empty house expresses her presence—scratches on the walls revealed by the furniture taken out, spots on the carpet, peeling paint, odd-shaped rooms, scraped floors.

You will never need to worry about a steady income.

Milk

heavy

in the yellow glass.

Human dignity, then, consisted not in the exercise of will to shape destiny but in the use of reason to contemplate and perhaps to tolerate fate.

My dream, wandering around the hotel by myself, a huge, square building. I follow the hallways until I find some empty rooms that are unlocked. I go inside and can hear the ocean even before I finish opening the doors and entering the rooms. I feel a sudden sense of being home. I should be here, but the room isn’t vacant and belongs to someone else, and I am trespassing.

There is no cosmetic for beauty like happiness.

I’m put on a waiting list to get into a college creative writing class, but one of the poets teaching the class agrees to work with me over a January term. His mobile of birds
spins above us as he goes over my poems. The campus is deserted, snow covered, and under drifts as I curl up in the library with huge windows, reading poetry.

Red-haired twin sisters room together, and they both write poetry, order pizzas from their room, ride horses, their long red hair, streaks of fire. They sit across from me in my first creative writing class. My roommate keeps her cello in our room sleeping in its case between our beds, riding in a seat next to her on the plane home.

Not knowing certain things in graduate school: how to talk during receptions, how to stand in elegant rooms with chandeliers, how to stand on balconies, how to make small talk, how to find a voice in the classroom, how to be certain I have ideas worth listening to, how not to look too rumpled after riding the bus to get there.

Everyone at the table is describing trips abroad. The futon is on the floor. The carpet is old, dirty, smelly. Drinks have been spilled on it, and cigarette holes are burned in. The futon is cold. I drink my roommate’s milk since I am out of food and money.

Bats are symbols of good luck.

V

Carried Over the Threshold

Fortuna had a following of married women
who asked her to preserve their sex appeal
so they could keep their husbands happy.

Tubes tethered to every part of my husband, parts taken from his body. A window
looks out on a glassed-in corridor that’s being built. Trash and debris scattered below
the scaffolding, beyond it hills, trees, a lake hidden there. I drive there after
work for three days, the days like an obstacle course to get through to see him. If one
section is taken out, does it all collapse?

The apartment has a fireplace, tile around the fireplace, a mantle. A
stand of trees gathered outside the windows. The cottonwood is familiar, her
sequined gown. I remember her. The cat sits puffed up and purring by the fireplace.

I stand at his head and stroke his hair. A gesture, but still the right one, the only one. The bed, more like a machine with wires and tubes to handle every bodily fluid, taking up the whole room. I am here with him and watching the sky pinking up, watching him sleep.

Invoked by newly married women who dedicated their virgin garments in her temples.

In this long, black, crinkled broom-skirt, see-through, the skirt pulled up around me, legs apart, like a bat or some creature.

**You are the guiding star of his existence.**

The cat's eyes have lines in them—they look like maps.

The goddess was queen of the household.

Staring into the branches of the tree outside our apartment or into my closet.

A huge painting, a portrait of a lady in blue, floats in a small boat and sinks into the water.

Storms, the worst ones packing 100-mph winds, and I feel helpless about what to do, put the cat in her carrier, stand near the windows, the worst thing to do, reports of a tornado setting down nearby.

**The night life is for you.**

Blown here: my room with painted desk, whirls of energetic paint, green, black, gold splattered, blown here, then suddenly it's quiet, solid furniture, walls,
hallway, balcony, fireplace, cat, husband, Matisse with fish in a glass of water, 
green leaves blowing in a breeze, hearth, verandah, grounds, wind, train whistles, 
owl almost sounding like a person somewhere above the roof at two a.m., silence 
before and after, a two-syllable sound who-who over the apartment, more 
like a word and a human voice than any other animal sound I’ve heard, but 
suspended in the air above me, around me, the cat and I listening. 
As he turns and sighs in his sleep, he sounds like a breeze picking up for a moment in 
a tree outside the window.

VI

All Roads Lead To Home

The place where one resides. A family living in a dwelling. A place of origin. A 
headquarters. An objective or place of safety in some games. To the center or 
heart of something.

The taxi from the Rome airport swerves around a rocky hill. We can see Fortuna’s 
white temple rising above the cypress.

In Italy Fortuna was consulted even by the Roman emperors. Her worship in Rome 
was introduced by the king most favored by Fortuna, even to the point of physical 
relationship.

After I finish my doctorate, I get rejection letters for teaching jobs with hundreds of 
qualified applicants.

Simplicity and clarity should be your theme in dress.

Interview: me in cranberry suits, black suits, navy suits.

A fashion show, models strutting down the Spanish Steps, statues of the muses gath-
ered around ancient lily ponds, the movement of their drapery stopped, a hint of 
flesh, hip, curving underneath.

Mussolini’s highway is constructed over the ruins.

[87]
We may follow her, she may intercept our paths, she may flee from us.

Fragments: heads, columns, a giant foot. Plants in urns, cool marble steps in July.

At an interview for a non-teaching job, the interviewer wants to know what my career goals are, why I'm applying for this job since I'm so overqualified.

Walking the narrow, winding streets to get gelato at night, people telling fortunes in the piazza, picking pockets, a struggle between man and beast carved into a fountain in the middle of all this, a language like water that flows from people without hesitation or correction.

The young girl at the shelter where I work comes into my office to hide from the noise. She likes to read, make up stories for me about butterflies. We play Clue together.

Her light brown hair falls forward, a curtain around her face. For the first time, she expresses grief over losing her mother, a waterfall that looks like it has no end. I sit beside her in the waiting room at the shelter.

Fortune makes sure of her prey by catching her victim in a net. We are symbolized as fish struggling in the weltering sea of life and finally caught by the goddess.

We all sit around the table eating breakfast at the shelter for teenagers. I like these meals at my job here. Around me the teenagers' faces and the faces of my co-workers. One boy still has baby fat in his cheeks, round, red cheeks. A social worker found him abandoned in an empty house without food, electricity, heat, running water. For this moment, we have everything: pancakes, syrup, orange juice, cereal, milk, eggs, bacon. A warm house holding out the sleet. Even though the boy looks like a child, he is large and sometimes doesn't know his own strength as he throws a chair, a TV at one of the workers. Today he is calm.

Brand-new white and beige bedding and furniture, light walls, very little color, sheer curtains, huge windows and the shoreline below, the constant, crashing waves, the sea colors, non-colors, a feeling of open spaces and light. I want to stand here looking out the windows and hearing only the sound of the ocean not the noise of city life.
Nuns singing out of tune in the Basilica of St. Cecilia. Her image carved on a marble casket, her hair flowing over her face, her limp body beneath the folds of her dress.

I put the rejection letters and applications away and teach where and when I can, for the chance to see the people in the room writing, swarming and circling the Art Deco lamps and steeples, high-pitched echolocating off objects near them, sounds, words, guides through the night-sky.

She was generally represented as blind.

Chic women steer their scooters around traffic jams, men talk on their cell-phones, passing swiftly beneath her temple rising above them, unseen.

I startle a huge heron as I ride my bike. She glides over the ditch running alongside the road. She has a gray wingspan and long neck. How could something that long necked and huge fly so gracefully and silently? She flies beside me effortlessly.