

Afterword from *Dropped Threads*

I was twenty-one years old, and standing in line to receive my Bachelor of Arts diploma from Hanover College. Major in English, minor in history. It was June, and the temperature was 97 degrees Fahrenheit. Under our black academic gowns my girlfriends and I wore, by previous agreement, nothing. Nothing at all. This was considered high daring in those days, 1957. The night before, seven or eight of us had gathered in the woods above the campus and conducted a ritual burning of our saddle shoes. We were utterly ignorant of what lay ahead of us, but imbued, for some reason, with a nose-thumbing rejection of the suffocating shell of convention that enclosed us.

And yet most of us were prepared to inhabit that safe place our parents had defined for us. We married the same summer we graduated, joined our lives with men no older than we were, and within a year we were buying houses, having babies and planting petunias. Hardly any of us thought of a career other than wife and mother. No one had suggested such a notion to us.

The 1957 graduation address was given by a very popular math professor at the college. He began his talk by telling us that we would remember nothing of what he would say that hot June morning. This was true; I sat dreaming of my wedding, which was just six weeks away, and of the apartment where I would live with my new husband. The charm of domesticity, its sweetness and self-containment, pulled at all my passions. But suddenly he broke through my daydreams. "I ask you to remember only two things," he said. "Remember the date, 1957, and remember the words *tempus fugit*."

I had studied Latin, but even if I hadn't I would have known what that phrase meant: *time flies*. Our convocation speaker was reminding us that our lives would speed by before we had grasped them. It was our responsibility to seize each moment and fill it with accomplishment. Otherwise our life would be wasted, worn away with the turning years, and we would grow old and disappointed in what we had made of it.

The phrase haunted me in the ensuing years. I was occupied with babies and with the hard physical work that babies involve. We moved several times and so there were always new domestic arrangements to carve out. Cleaning, cooking, coping, running errands - my days were filled with such minutiae. It was in the calmer, cooler evenings that the phrase *tempus fugit* would return to me, beating at the back of my brain and reminding me that time was rushing by. I was spooked, frightened by what this meant.

And then, quite suddenly, I realized it meant nothing. *Tempus* did not *fugit*. In a long and healthy life, which is what most of us have, there is plenty of time. There is time to sit on a houseboat for a month reading novels. There is time to learn another language. There is travel time and there is stay-at-home time. Shallow time and fallow time. There is time in which we are politically involved and other times when we are wilfully unengaged. We will have good years and bad years, and there will be time for both. Every moment will not be filled with accomplishment; we would explode if we tied ourselves to such a regimen. Time was not our enemy if we kept it on a loose string, allowing for rest, emptiness, reassessment, art and love. This was not a mountain we were climbing; it was closer to being a novel with a series of chapters.

My mother-of-small-children chapter seemed to go on forever, but, in fact, it didn't. It was a mere twelve years, over in a flash. Suddenly I was at a place where I had a little more time to reflect. I could think, for instance, about writing a real novel, and I did. And then another novel, and then another. I had a desk in this new chapter of my life, a typewriter and a pile of paper that belonged just to me. For the first time I needed a file cabinet and a wrist watch, something I'd done without for a decade. I remember I spent the whole of an October afternoon working on a single sentence; I was not by nature a patient person, but for this kind of work and at this time in my life, I was able to be endlessly, foolishly, patient.

In 1985 I looked up from my desk and realized that the children had gone, all five of them. The house was quieter now. The days were mine to arrange any way I wished. I wrote a novel in which, for the first time, there were no children. It was a different kind of novel than I'd written

before, with a more inventive structure. The publisher was worried about this innovation, but I was insistent. The insistence was something new, and it coloured the chapter I was living in, my early-middle-age chapter. The woman I saw in the mirror looked like someone else, but I knew it was really me, relocated in time and breathing another grade of oxygen. I was given an office and a key to that office. I loaded it down with plants and pictures, a soft lamp, a carpet. It felt like a tiny apartment, offering solitude and giving a new permission, another space in which to live my ever-altering life.

Friendship took time, but luckily I had time as I entered yet another phase. My women friends provided support, amusement, ideas, pleasure, wisdom. The two-hour lunch was a luxury I could afford during this period; moreover, it was a kind of necessary music. The more words we tossed into the air the closer we felt to the tune of our own lives. We talked about what we knew and what we didn't know. Our conversations were punctuated with the joyous discovery of commonalities, the recognition that the narratives of our lives bumped along differently, but with the same change rhythms.

But one day, over a long lunch with my friend Marjorie Anderson, we spoke for the first time of all that went unspoken, even in an age of intense and open communication. There were the things our mothers hadn't voiced, the subjects our teachers had neglected, the false prophetic warnings (tempus fugit, for example) we had been given and the fatal silence surrounding particular areas of anxiety or happiness. Why weren't we told? Why weren't we warned? What contributed to the reticence between generations, between one woman and another?

We decided to ask some of our women friends to talk about the skipped discourses in their lives and how they had managed, at last, to cope with the surprise of self-discovery, stumbling on that which had been missing: an insight, a truth, an admission, a dark hole. The proposals poured in. This was an exciting time; Marjorie and I were exhilarated by the ideas that were suggested, and astonished that so few overlapped. The areas where woman had been surprised by lack of knowledge ranged from childbirth to working with men, to illness, loss, friendship and secrecy, to the power of sexual feelings, the frustrations of inherited responsibility and the recurrent patterns that haunt us.

The finished essays, which arrived like dispatches from the frontier, described these varied experiences and reported on how they were confronted or accepted. Each voice was separate, and yet each connected subtly with others, as though informed by an underground stream. The essays expressed perplexity at life's offerings: injury and outrage that could not be voiced (Woman, hold thy tongue), expectations that could not be met, fulfillment arriving in unexpected places, the need for roughness, the beginning of understanding, the beginning of being able to say what had once been unsayable. Or, in my case, the apprehension of a structure that gave fluidity and ease to a long life, the gradually (or suddenly) shifting scenes, each furnished with its own noise and movement, its particular rewards and postures.

We move through our chapters mostly with gratitude. Who isn't renewed by startling scenery or refreshed by undreamed-of freedoms? Surprise keeps us alive, liberates our senses. I thought for a while that a serious illness had interrupted my chaptered life, but no, it is a chapter on its own. Living with illness requires new balancing skills. It changes everything, and I need to listen to it, attend to it and bring to it a stern new sense of housekeeping. But I have time for this last exercise. All the time in the world.

Carol Shields, March 2000