

SUBSTITUTIONS

One Mother's Day I pinched tissue paper
into a bouquet and when the teacher
said give to your mothers or to she who
was most like your mother I hung the basket
from our neighbor's back door. The phone rang. Sent
to retrieve I tied one green pipe cleaner
to the doorknob, fluffed the crumpled pink sheet.

There is a legend in my family
that when my mother was still a baby
my grandfather allowed a traveling
gypsy band to stay on his land. Their laws
state Rromany never steal from a host
but the family jokes she was swapped out,
exchanged like a Faer folk's swaddled changeling.

My mother like a ruby, the wives' tales
her lips spun: step on a crack and you'll break
your mother's back; play with matches and you'll
wet the bed; drop a knife a fight will brew;
if your ears burn someone's talking 'bout you;
eat pork at New Year's as pigs snout forward;
avoid poultry as chickens scratch backward.

Sayings like incantations, artifacts
to bring luck: turkey wishbones dried, broken
over the kitchen sink; bayberry wicks
on Christmas Day which must snuff naturally;
mornings spent scouring the yard's clover
for four leafs, pressed in *Uncle Remus, Swiss
Family Robinson, Robinson Crusoe*.

But magic? Escape? What would Houdini
say? My mother appeared one October
opal day, he disappeared on the eve
of saints. After ten years, when his wife Bess
ended the séances, blew out the flame,
did she wish one last performance, to swap
body, soul? Return in a glass sub trunk.