

I Can Climb That
Sharon Verner Chappell

From the rearview mirror, I watch
Her eyes stare out the window
the plastic and glass framing a girl I know and don't know
my daughter.

As we drive away
She watches daddy stand at the curb, leaning against the wind
his feet cemented to the sidewalk
Her lips are drawn, eyes downcast
She is not happy about this
Gazing out the window
She focuses on other things, hoping for distraction.
The buildings and trees pass
Street upon street
Hands held in sidewalk hugs
She watches from a distance

Can I do this, mommy?

The sun catches a glint on the window
A narrow opening into another day
The fields in patchwork colors
She rolls the knob down, brave against the cold,
reaches out with open palm,
An unfettered wing catching air
She rides the wind
undulating motion and bone—
Fingers, wrist, arm, elbow
The new light travels across her face
Wind tickles her lashes
She can't help but smile

She can't help but laugh out loud

I can do this.

Her words come at me so fast
I lose my grip on the wheel for a second:

I can climb that brick wall
I can jump that gutter
I can squeeze through that hole in the fence
I can hop to that roof, no problem.
I can...
She hesitates.
I mean I could... if I wanted to.
She looks at me in the mirror.
I could.
But I won't, not today.
She smiles
and scans the objects as they whirl by.
I can climb that,
And that
And that.

*Where's daddy?
Will I see him tomorrow?*

She continues to look out, wriggling her fingers
Her shoes kicking the air between the seats:
I want to tell him all the things I can do.

She can't remember
even though it was fifteen minutes ago.
"It's only a couple of weeks,"
I say and smile.
So glad she will never know a longer separation, like me.

Small steps
Persistence through pain
The body learning
In and through surroundings
Against loss
To see what it can do, what it means to be "I"

Tell me again, my daughter
What you can do.
If you tell me, maybe I will know more about me.

Can I climb that?

his poem was inspired by the “Stubborn Love” video by The Lumineers. It was also inspired by my autoethnographic analysis of my childhood experience with divorce and my daughter’s everyday insistence that she can do anything. I am fascinated by language’s power to create reality, and by the necessary shift the world requires—that adults must listen to children if we are going to grow and heal as people and as a society. The dignity of children needs to be nourished beyond the superficial assertion that we leave no child behind. Children are marginalized rather than empowered, left to the whims of those enfranchised to make decisions. As a parent, my goal is to pay attention to my child and learn from her, what she is saying and what she sees as potential in herself and the world. That potential is our hope, and our closest connection to what is possible.



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