

WHEN I WAS FOUR I shared a bathroom with my mother and father. And one late fall afternoon, as my room was darkening, I sat at my tiny desk and watched my mother in the bathroom as she dressed for a dinner party. I loved to watch her stand over the sink. The sheen of her slip in the bathroom light slid over the curves of her body like my finger in a bowl of frosting. I loved my mother's body – her wide toenails, her skin smelling like tomato soup, the space between her breasts brown with sun and close to the sound of the heart.

She was in every way my female deity. Now every woman in the act of love resembles her – as I, looking up into a cherished face, reach through time to relive the only miracle I ever knew: I once lived weightless, in trust, without language.

But at that moment, as I watched her reel in a flurry of smells and powders, I must have felt myself to be quite separate from her, because I was suddenly seized with a desire to court her. To bear gifts as if riding on horseback from some faraway kingdom. I wanted to lay them, breathtaking, at her feet, and by doing so bind her heart to mine, ever after to be buoyed up like a raft on a calmed ocean.

Alas, my kingdom at four was too small, and consisted only of treasures borrowed from her: my tiny green pegboard desk, my cup of cocoa, my pencils, my lamp, my bed, my coloring books. Even the shoes on my feet she bought me. Nevertheless, I was determined to have her see me as her suitor. I began to think of ways to transform the contents of my room into things which, by becoming personalized by me, would become extraordinary to her.

For example, a pencil could be sharpened at both ends. No longer that simple stick spilling color in one downward direction, the pencil was now a baton, risen up in such a vivid display of symmetry, it nearly spun into flight on its own.

And what of three of those former pencils – red, green, and purple – fixed together with a rubber band? Three wands, three wishes granted; not, no not, mere childish fragments scrambled together from my pegboard desk.

And then, my best idea came to me as I looked at my cup of cocoa. Like the prince trapped inside the body of the frog, that humble white cup, so maligned by the everyday, so misrepresented as a mere vessel, was a work of art waiting to occur.

I quickly snapped a rubber band around the cup, unveiling its true nature, and with my other gifts, presented it to my mother. I love you, I told her, as if those were the passwords to the gate, and my gifts the tickets to prove it. And I waited for the gate to open.

My mother told me, in the kindest way possible, that she knew I loved her, that she acknowledged my eagerness, but that my gifts were hastily constructed, showed no real consideration of her, and did not, of themselves, express anything in particular.

“You really have to think about what you give to people,” she told me.

I returned to my room, which was by now very dark except for a ring of light around the lamp. It seemed to me to be a shabby light, too tiny, too yellow, and beyond its uncanny fringes the room loomed and echoed. And there in its plain and singular warmth were the vulnerable and common objects I knew so well, but could not transform. And as I stood looking toward that small circle of lamplight, I felt for the first time an inexpressible loneliness.

Now every act of writing resembles this, because I must think very hard about what I give to people. I want to offer a cup with a rubber band around it and say, this is more than just a cup, take it and we will float up together like that moment in dreams, or that moment I reach for, looking up into the faces of the women I love, from some faraway kingdom, bearing the inexpressible.