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## The Purple Box

Whatever happened to the purple box  
my mean first grade teacher, Miss Kameron,  
kept in a cabinet in the back of the classroom  
below a paper frieze of the alphabet?

She didn't show it to us right away.  
First she taught us how to form our letters  
between the lines on flimsy writing paper.  
One by one we stood trembling at her desk

as she checked our work, and sometimes tore it up.  
One weekend, though, our homework was to draw  
our house, an assignment I welcomed  
because I wanted to grow up to be an artist.

Most of my classmates, except some of the girls,  
were still drawing the sky as a strip of blue  
scribbled at the very top of the paper.  
One morning, standing at the classroom windows,

I showed my friends, as my mother had shown me,  
how the sky's blue came down to the tops of the trees  
and even between them, all the way to the ground.  
Looking right at it, they shook their heads.

But seeing is one thing, drawing another.  
Our house was old, and made of bricks,  
and I didn't know how to draw it. My mother  
found a large pad of paper and took me out

to the terrace in back and told me to start  
by sketching the outline of the house in pencil,

then the windows and door. She said to make it fill the paper, then she went inside.

There were two gable dormers with arched windows and squiggly white trim that looked like cake frosting, thirteen big windows with shutters painted a shade of green so dark

they were almost black, a tall white door with little windows around it, a tin roof painted a greener green, and two brick chimneys. I sketched it all in, as my mother had told me to.

It was late October—every now and then an orange leaf sailed down from the giant maple that shaded the terrace. I got frustrated drawing the countless bricks, but when my mother

came out to check on me, she showed me how I didn't need to include them all but just suggest them by drawing a cluster here and there. I colored the whole thing in with crayons.

That week Miss Kameron got out the purple box. It was longer and wider than it was high, and in the lower right corner, in gold script, bore the name of a women's clothing store

in downtown Cincinnati. Miss Kameron opened it and showed us what was inside: drawings by her pupils from previous years—some of them were even in high school now.

Only the best drawings, she explained, were selected for the purple box. Then she held up mine, and showed it to the class, and explained how good it was and why

she was putting it in the purple box. My heart pounded in my throat and ears.

Everyone was looking at me. I wanted to crawl  
under my desk and hide as Miss Kameron

closed the lid over my drawing—  
would I ever get it back? All these years,  
I realize now, I've somehow pictured it  
in that same cabinet, inside the purple box,

as though I could go back to that classroom  
and find it, as though it hadn't been shipped off  
in a box that once contained a fancy dress  
to the purple underworld of oblivion.