

Obeisance

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He was lean. Fingers of grease reached to his shoulders.
He had a lank, loose-gathered ponytail. A face
grimed with asphalt dust out of which
the milk-blue eye whites stared. Eyes
of someone living with bad news, or himself
bad news, or perhaps simply famished.

My mother let him in while my father was at school, my father
with his white dress shirt and narrow spruce-blue
tie, his brass-cornered briefcase. Something to do with
a broke-down truck, the phone, a sandwich? The shower:
the sound of falling water, steam curling out
the half open door, the wallpaper with silver eagles perched
in federal pose. I'm coming closer,
closer. The chrome ring around
powder blue porcelain. A glimpse of jeans, the legs
the oily gold of eel skins, draping
the sink's edge. Do I imagine this now,
or was I there? Did I watch him
step out of the shower through the hinge-gap
of the door, did he see me see him
in his nudity? A man would place his palm
over the stiffening, hook fingers over the head to hold
it downward and away. But how is it I see this? How
have I always known?

She has no memory of him.

He kaleidoscopes with other dark men
of my childhood, the one who tried to sell me
green coconuts for quarters on the beach in Florida,
jean cutoffs unraveling in fringes to his knees,
shoulders burnt to oxblood, eyes
all pupil like a clubbed animal's. Or
the rosewood Jesus in nana's hall, eyes rolled
upward, bodyweight thinning
the chest fleshless, the abdomen's shallow bowl
between hip bones standing up under the flesh
like the wings of a taunted swan. My uncle

Paralyzed in a dim room that smelled of cat, his neck
 arching back to keep the head's place upon
 the pillow, slipping on the black hair, luxuriant and coarse, over
 and over like a man treading water with his last strength.

That gesture. Like the little female cat, a brown tufted black who,
 brain-tumor-driven, turned in place
 with a compulsive grace so intent it seemed sexual.
 An obeisance: like kneeling before
 your god. Her low-slung belly bulged
 with knobby fruit. She dropped each of her
 five kittens in a different province
 of my childhood: under the boat house
 where black crickets bred, in the wild mustard
 behind the sand pile, in the storm drain that traveled under
 the steep yard like a throat, whose mouth delivered
 a continuous, echoing mewl among shore reeds;
 by the blacksnake hole in plush moss where toadstools spread
 their ruby cowls, and one near-far we sought
 under bittersweet vines, in the chokecherries, until its shrill
 hunger-cries wavered, pulsed out once more, went silent. Covered
 in something – lice, maggots – we shampooed
 them in that sink, fine briar-claws catching on flaws in the glaze,
 fur clumped in points like wet lashes.

He was dirty, and thin, his face a mask of grease which white eyes
 hollowed. She let him into the house while my father was at work.
 I would go to the bathroom after, open the closet, finger
 the satin covered buttons on her garter belt, work
 her eyelash curler, clamping its gummed lids.

Did I cry out and no one came? Is this why I can't bring myself
 to pray to God? He held himself, then slyly
 showed the head to me, as if to say
I'll teach you how to love the men who frighten you.

All the men you'll ever love will be dark.