

Brennan Burnside

Cracked Plates

The night has been tumultuous. I was dreaming about cracked plates again. Not wings of broken shards but plates and discolorations around the fissures that define them. I remember their lines when I wake up at night and sit among our intersecting limbs to think about the softness and give of their flesh... porcelain comes from clay. Like us. Like *her*. We finish the process in fire. Absent fingers can create arabesques that speak over conversations in the next generation, consume dinner party conversations of the future dead...

She has mother of pearl skin and deltas of cerulean veins. I trace them to press myself back to sleep. I am haunted by the nebulous discoloration on her thigh because I never asked where it came from. Over breakfast I'll think, were you born with it? Did you fall last night? *Was it me* – no, the room is empty and everything is tightly fit into corners. At night her body always curls beside me in a treble clef before our hateful work of sleep. The bass note holds a tremulous B flat.

We are both awake now. Eventually she climbs up my arm and speaks to me. She is obsessed with what she looked like. I tell her the colors have faded and if she presses long enough, I tell her about the pristine China in my cabinets,

the workmanship engraved on their spotless surfaces...

The kiln of the sheets.

The heater harmonizing. My body spread flat and folded over on itself. She falls back asleep.

“I have seen it a thousand times before...” she mumbles before disappearing. I remain awake, unable to move my stare from the bare wall in front of me...

Outside I hear seagulls mulling over the neighborhood. In the early morning they sound like cackling smokers, but late at night they resemble a needle drilling into stone. I imagine someone trying to break through our walls. I don't know what they want. I can only see the delta of hairline fractures creeping upward from the base of the wall.

Land of Last October

Everyone is still asleep right now. The air conditioning creates mounds of transparent snow, which I push through to enter my parents' house, looking for my keys. Suddenly, I am lost in a wilderness of picture frames: old people captured from the wild, imprisoned in a frozen world

among a nest
of tightly packed narratives.

In books, people neither live nor die though. They remain. Decorated in blues, in graying light like small patinas of bald on the crest of undulating grassy earth.

When I look at the pictures, I think of how close these people were to not existing in my world. I barely met them. Some of them left before I arrived. Frozen prefaces peek from behind toilet paper rolls on top of the commode. They are magnetized and kept on the refrigerator door.

One sits by a soap dispenser on the kitchen sink. I wash my hands in his stale presence and... *my keys are in my pocket.*

"Existing," I mutter. More like a breath. Like a flag on Sunday afternoon.

Existing only when people see me. Before I go, I look at my picture on the mantle below the TV, easily missed, waiting for some stranger to pass by on the way to somewhere else....

I know we have appointments
and we have to leave
because there's work in the morning and this is not
a conversation *but a fact*: the traffic will be bad, I know but...
all these ideas about the future
don't mean that it actually exists.

Last time on the farm just before this winter

My dad is just retirement now and
I have younger brothers, but they're
quite different from me. I think siblings are strangers
that feel as if they know each other and spend
the entire party trying to figure out how.
Outside the hills blink and a season of meals pass
in Norman Rockwell masses. Table settings and
utensiled percussion. Grass dries in a rainless November.
My fingers grow longer and rougher, shedding the summer's
skin in coconut flakes on the cutting board. I know I can work
until my 60 years move into an older atmosphere where I'll have nothing
more to do with negotiation because, as you know, the rooms have all been
prepared.
The smell of apple spice from down the hallway settles and I have only a single
problem to sort. Resolution will happen in the kitchen. Burnt austral colors
playing checkers across the peeling floor. My grandmother
found it in an oiled pot. She pointed to her breath then...
Don't say anything and then quietly walk into the mountains.
If you stay, they'll have plans around you to run their business.
Ok. In my bed, I feel more mineral than animal anyway.
The house bruises at sundown. Time is an orange peel.
The smell, not the shape. I prefer shadows to tea leaves.
My arms will become cherry wood and there won't
even be a moment to imagine acceptance. I'll already be more
bivalve than biped by that point, more fieldstone than farmer.