

Maggie King

She Who Bathes Her Knees

Not a day over twelve, long hair in braids, as black  
and as sheen as a roach, lips  
smooth and matte as rust-smearred clay, decorated  
with the most exquisite baubles of the land.  
Small, gold medallions aligned where your nipples fall—  
cheeks, forehead, scalp marked red.

Do they call you that because he beat you red?  
When he drank the fire poison-water, did he drag you by your mane? Leaving black  
jagged rocks embedded in your knees? When no one was looking, did you allow tears to fall  
weaving rivers down the ridges of your swollen cheeks and lips?  
Did he rage on you because the white man took his land?  
You resented feeling ugly on the inside—getting decked then dressed up and decorated.

On your wedding day, all you remember is noticing how beads of sweat decorated  
the crevices of his leather-worn skin, how the sweltering heat rose from the red  
rock mountains, how your father so easily traded you for a fertile slice of land.  
As the shaman sounded the calfskin drum, pungent smoke swirled from incense burned black.  
The bridegroom took you by your heart-shaped face, planting his cracked lips  
there upon yours and in that moment your spirit sank with nothing soft to break its fall.

Do you think they believe you? When you say your wounds come from a bad fall?  
Passing by, do you notice how the gaiety drops and conversations become decorated  
with under breaths from hushed lips?  
You're not fooling anyone, little bird. For it is read  
all over the map of your face. You stare blankly as you shuffle by and we notice the black  
shadows on your skin, as you pretend to be interested in something in the distant land.

As evening's violet and navy blanket the land,  
the sun retracts the comfort of her light. The fall  
of night, you know the time, when the black  
holes in his eyes swallow the irises and any inking of calm that decorated  
his face is lost. All he can see is red  
as poison-water glistens on those cracked lips.

Hate spews from his shriveled, twinkling lips.  
Those rock fists, so hard, they break the skin where they land.  
The divots of red  
Return to your soft, fawn skin. Pride keeps you up for so long before the inevitable fall.  
Then you try to lie still and shut your eyes, though your mind carousels, reach rotation decorated  
By recollections of more hopeful times and you find some comfort in the black.

If you came upon a mirror, would you recognize yourself with black eyes and battered lips?  
You wonder how you became decorated with so many scars after so few years on land—  
how the days fall and end blood red.

The Old Maid and the Sea

Three decades since you left

Three sheets to the wind I am

Standing here on the edge

Trying to find meaning in your missing

Looking for a message in this bottle

Married to la mar

You are

Everything she wanted

She is your master

I am your barren moor

She's see through

My sea view

I see

She is measureless and mystical

I am carnal and corporal

She is saline and sediment

But I am bone and blood

Eulogy for Anita Berber

I painted a picture of you, futuristic.  
Head on a perpetual tilt perhaps  
to allow the white rail drip,  
made obvious by your dragon nostrils.  
Shrugged off the shoulder,  
and draped in demise—  
an eye contact evasion aficionado.

You never would have made it  
to the Red-Hat Society,  
but I painted you the way you painted Berlin.  
Grotesque and gaunt, gyrating for Germans,  
pirouetting on pelvises,  
androgynously en travesti.  
A show time show-off.

Sour-puss'd & puckered,  
Cupid's bow-painted lips  
paid for tricks.  
Caked on & drawn in;  
a pantomime's paramour  
chewing white, ether-soaked rosebuds.  
Gut distended from coke-bloat,  
disguised as African infant starvation.  
I painted you, killing time.