

J. Mitchell

First-time Runaway

The master heard about her death after searching the trees where the dark deceived him by taking the shape of her back – the narrow waist and large behind. The creeping vines were meant to lead straight to her but the overseer said she had to be cut down from a creaking cotton tree behind the big house. A miracle the young tree took her weight; and wasn't it a shame? They'd never find another cook as good as her.

The master staggered with the news across the fields towards the slave house where he scattered those others like hens to fall down on her bed and bury his face in the crumpled cloth of her one other dress. He wanted to know the close familiar smell of sweat and something else that always escaped him. Then, wet-eyed, he studied the cloth to try and see her face again – the lines on her forehead when she laughed, the crease of the mouth he kissed and slapped.

He saw a tear on the sleeve and a broken zip so he wiped his eyes with the dress, stood up and threw it at his feet. He straightened his back and went outside to call the overseer. He was told to find the ones who must have known her plan, and whip them as a group to make them feel what they failed to learn. The women and girls especially must have the master's will inscribed on their backs so they would know they could not cheat him. He paid an indecent price.

Father was the F Word

I wish he would leave now that he's dead
but his voice is lodged in my throat, the echo
of curse words he used when I started to speak –
the cutting sounds and fist-like fermentations
that made him seem so strong,
even when his body was frail at the end.

We gathered round his hospital bed
grave in concentration as, open-mouthed,
he fought for his final breaths, attacked
the atmosphere, demanding life.
He looked afraid as he moved his lips
to find he had lost his voice,
used up all the times he damned the food
on his plate or praised it with curses –
much the same for a man at war with his words.

Someone said we should pray
so I copied them and lowered my head.
They moaned: 'Our Father who art in heaven,'
but as my prayers were about to be heard
I silently spat the words he used instead
beginning with the F word.

Jamaica Rain

Memories are falling like rain
all at once
like the flat, hard palm of a hand
disrupting the day
once clear
the sun on each surface
then in a seasonal blink
disarray
The sky closes its eyes
it is low
grey
dark as a stone
the veranda soon slick as a riverbed
the house heard to moan
unsettling the earth
just dirt
consistent with rain
washing away what was fixed
sane
a hill like the side of a head exposed
the detailed crevices of soil
a brain
rolling smooth

The trees are trying to speak
they are mad
mouth full of rain
she is mad
cleft almost in two
her arms and hair loose
but trapped in her body
weighed down by the nature
the memory
the family of roots
she is trying to speak
say the rain makes her mad
and the memory of rain
The sky claps its hands

attention sought
gained
Memories are falling like rain

Monica Darling

No one but her
could blow out seventy-six candles (and one for good luck)
with a single resolute breath.

When the smoke rose up to her face she frowned:
'Who are you calling mum?'

She will only respond to 'Monica Darling' as if in a Noel Coward play,
not some residential home she planned to burn down
till the nurses began to call her Monica Darling as well.

They carefully place a doilie on a sterling silver tray, ensure her cup and saucer aren't chipped.

Monica Darling will only drink jasmine tea when Mum didn't care about things like that.
She raised four kids in a three-bedroom flat and worked two jobs when Dad worked nights.

Now she won't accept a hunk of cake when she used to crave sugar so much.
It's thin slivers only, served on a bone china plate.

She's given up her cigarettes – smoking isn't ladylike.
She's thrown away the socks she used to wear at night.
'Better to have chilblains than look like some old tramp.'

She was never a wife.
'Who's that old man in the silver frame?
Take out his picture, re-use the frame.'

There are days when the mention of children makes her laugh –
'Oh, dear me no. I never went through any of that.'

Monica Darling is happy now. She doesn't know who's she's left behind.

She sips her jasmine tea.