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My Father Sits

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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My Father Sits

I.

My father sits,
the lampshade white
as the blank corners
of the newspaper he turns
one page of,
then another,
to scan the faces
for something
that recognizes him.

I am 17 and in love
with the blond boy
whose hands fished dirty
under my blouse.
I think of his cold
stranger-palm
on my spine.

My father reads
at the kitchen table,
the plate with only
a fingerprint of gravy,
the wounded trace of gristle.
His hands so large
the paper should dissolve
between them.

My lover knows
I am still a virgin.
His hands lose
all exactness
below my waist.
I will be ready
for that drive soon.
My father knows

and looks up from his paper,
his eyes frozen as if some
murder small and mean
had already been committed.

(continued)

II.

My father sits
in the car.
He has left my mother.
We drive to the supermarket where
we buy all she never would --
delicate-fingered cakes,
cinnamon rolls large
as breasts, stars
of chocolate.

My father rolls the cart.
I throw in hip-shaped bottles
of amber shampoos,
pastel powders that blur
my eyelids. I look
at my father:
he is sad. Nothing
works anymore.

Afterwards,
when I am crying softly,
my head against the cold
window, my father takes
my hand, my scared
animal hand,
but I jerk back
to the dark glass,
my father crumbling under
each wave of streetlight.

III.

My father sits
on the couch.
I have left home now
but come back to visit.
He reads a magazine,
the glossy pages
of women and perfume
a blur before his eyes.
"What can I give you now?"
he asks, his own finger,
remarried.

(continued)

IV.

My father sits
with me. He asks
what to wear
to the wedding.
"Anything, anything
will be fine."
He'll have a boutonniere
of dried tobacco leaves
and tiny starflowers.
I leave my father
and dream

I am in his city,
the one where I was born.
It is 5 a.m.
and no train will let me on.
I look for my father,
but only men,
who are almost him,

ride by,
sitting,
train after train,
from the darkness,
crumbling into
the darkness.