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Mercy

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Mercy

I.

Imagine that life ends
after him. So your days turn
on the axis of that immaculate
inhabitation of your body,

a creation so clean and strong
your other sons fade in the earthly thrust,
brief cohabitation, that brought
them from thighs more red-smeared

and unclean than the butterflyed
ribcages of doves on the altar.
As the young, jealous god was learning
mercy through his messiah, you,

years later, resisted falling to ground
outside of a temple where your son,
your son, was calling, crying *Hate your own
father and mother and wife and children*

*and brothers and sisters and indeed
your own life, reject them and come before me.*
You summon him anyway,
send word through the shoving

crowd of his waiting family. The strength
of your bones amazes you
again when his rejection comes,
ringing prophesy—

*I have no mother or brothers
—an example, fictive family
of light, the sweat from crucifying bodies,
a dust stirred from tombs by a rising.*

II.

So have stories filtered
to a man in Paintville, who sands
a table one evening,
sands down to straight edges, rough legs.

He is in the kitchen pouring sun tea
over crackling ice, trying to assimilate his birth
from someone now plotted into heavy
clay, who taught him, without ever saying a word,

to brew tea in the afternoon sun—he watches
drops slip to the floor from her cracked
pitcher. Then the knock,
maybe slight scraping of knuckles on the loose

mesh screen to the back door—
he sees cornfields embracing
the sinking light first, then the texture
of her tears, smells his mother's

lemon lotion—and then he is kneeling
to scoop up pieces of porcelain.
The girl enters and helps wipe up the amber
which spreads across the floor.

When they finally talk, it is shelter she takes
from a townie's demand for her body,
her flight as he occupied himself
with another girl. For now, he strips and shucks

silk from his silver corn, slices yellow
tomatoes and splays them on a dish; he washes
his hands, fills a basin, kneels and bathes
the bare feet of the sacrifice

denied that sits at his hewn table
with strong knees, slipping tomato seeds
and flesh into her mouth, axis
repeated, setting sun lighting her hair.

—Mary Ann T. Davis '00