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The Writer's Wife

Alison Stine
Denison University

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The Writer's Wife

1.

Sewanee, Tennessee.

Late July is music snug against your hips, legs draped
over the back porch of this hungry place, swinging.

They bring the sweet tea in cold water jars here
and write the menu on boards still black, in a girl's
smallish handwriting, chalk stub dangling like a cigarette, swung
on twine, poetry above the counter.

The whispered yellow waitress is pregnant with the busboy's hands,
measuring the wide circumference of her belly with soft fingers, pressed
for listening, asking, *If the mother laughs, does the baby?*

2.

The faces of the writing department reflect as whitefish
looming above their dinner plates.

You rise, gauze skirt whispering against the wax hem of tablecloth,
not to make a speech, not to toast, but pray
bow our heads close our eyes give thanks.

I watch your gray lashes shadow
your face with slanting fern shapes.

Light from the window cuts down your hair,
a perfect sun scar leading into the bone shrug,
disappearing in the white curve of collar, pressed, civilized.

I watched your face during your husband's reading,
the young talented fiction writer

pouring his formative heart before the scrutiny of seated undergrads,
professors shadowed in the back, suited pillars.

You did not blink when the words *whore white trash cock*
came from those familiar lips. No sound

at the metaphors for Carolina girls, white sugar-skinned and slow voiced,
spreading their bodies across men as quick as sunburn.

What were you thinking,

ankles crossed, hands crossed over the soft secrets of your lap?

I saw your lips, closed and listening, tremble

at the words *Jesus Christ*,

the disapproved rocking of that red mouth, your pale biscuit chin.

We passed a moment there, the three of us, then just us

as his eyes broke, his finger fought to find its place

in his well-received first collection.

3.

Dedication to you printed on the fat of his palm like a fortune,
 where else could you go but down?
 First in the white sheeted bed,
 then on the mirror table with a masked audience urging
 on all sides. You,
 the only one without a costume,
 wore white scales of sweat upon your upper lip,
 paper on your swollen body.
 The softest bed will be this one.

4.

Your stone is the title of his early drafts,
 un-revised and always will be:
Annie, wife and mother,
 should read: *wife and vessel,*
 vehicle for his hands, his child, his words,
 for surely we all know where his stories sprang from.
 The tender white center of your stomach
 has been immortalized
 by the *New York Times* book review.

Oh Annie,

were you sorry you married a man
 who could distill your movements so perfectly it was as if he coined you,
 invented you from the scraps of a pretty girl
 he saw in line at the store or walking along a roadside once.
 Perhaps they will find folded poems in your solemn dresser drawers,
 or scraps of spent paper floating, lily-like,
 in the bath, caught in your perfume,
 beautiful stories swirling around your hair brush bristles,
 lost in the vortex of all that silk black softness, untouched,

trapped. Your words, stillborn

breath.

—Alison Stine '00