

Dark Lady

Aunties asked me about my goings. I'd look back,

"Big O, he ain't shave, I'm looking for another brother to kiss on!" They liked this one, the aunties who sit on their stoops bundled in sweaters year-round while morning skies turn from purple to grey. Their husbands weren't poets but thirsty sons of bitches: cheaters, alcoholics, and pushers. I told all of them that I knew of a hot spot for vacation if they wanted to come and, y'know, see how downhill made they calves feel or something.

I liked rolling blunts too much not to get my devil's lettuce straight from the source. Venom from the front door gave them a sour kick I liked; my high made Big O tolerable, as a thought mostly. It made my poetry better, loosened them thorns too. Made Love and Death real abstract. Especially Love, but he never earned more than a faux glance from me. Vacant stares with glassy eyes tinged yellow, that was my look. When I was high he was busy, usually strutting through his desk-world, rustling through papers stuffed into his father's cedar desk. The one that survived him after passing from heartbreak in the aftermath of Mama O's death last Autumn. She was larger than life before her depression hung her up like an ornament on the cedar tree outside the apartment. Same tree that gave the wood for the desk and our front door. His father, on a different Autumn day some 27 years back, three years after their chapel-wedding, had stitched a leather mat to the desk, embroidered with golden stones round the edge. In the corner of the desk pointed toward their bedroom, which was now ours, his father had etched a photo of Mama O in her youth. It was a particular one. One of them ones that was always looking at you no matter how you moved. He was a writer too, distracted by, consumed by, made alive by his love. For even if he wasn't writing, he met her eyes wherever he could.

Their eyes had that same leather finish, Mama O and and Big O. Darker where the age wanted to show, and heavy. Embattled. *What horrible Odyssey did you fall from when you died, that you left for me to finish, that your son refused?* My eyes had become leather too. Anyone who finds those shit-stained vows one day, they'd tell you our marriage was doomed. It's only since I've been here that I've come to find out: Doom and Hell are one subway stop apart, then it's the Black Hole.

Girls, you lose your mind in this heat. My words become loose in my mouth. I almost uttered an "I love you" when his hand brushed past my ass on his way to the guest room. These days, I don't have to say much for my words to fall like baby teeth. Or like grown teeth. Rotted down to the root, like half the niggas here talking shit, avoiding bills. We all knew "suddenly" just wasn't the way this city got down. My mind was a black hole on this stoop, waiting to orbit around something that could swallow the sun. I let gravity do a number on me. I walked downhill. It was closer to where I wanted to settle, and I wasn't in the business of wasting my time.

His ego crept into his eyes and thickened the layers of leather, the same color as cockroach backs. His ego swelled his eyes so tight that I disappeared into white noise, significant as the bummy

light in the living room that made the wall stains look like crawlers. I'd scutter out under the front door and go for my walks when the cover of tinted flesh granted me respite. My hand trailed behind the rest of my body. I touched the substance on the door with my ring finger, hoping it'd catch on one of the larger splinters and slide off into the drain. The aunties started wearing sweaters after they saw what marriage and Autumn did to Mama O. I waited on the stoop. That's what black folk in this city did to reset, to see if life suddenly became any more worth living while married to a poet.

My skin froze at the feeling of your touch, my goosebumps no longer fell back to my skin. Seized like frightened warts. Almost sickly. But worse was how you'd hover over me like a halo of thorns. We weren't religious but marrying you gave me a little more admiration for how Jesus survived his crown on that first Good Friday. I wanted to exit your orbit, but Death wouldn't budge from its office chair, its stance, its laze, heck, Death wouldn't look my way. Ladies, he was larger than (my) life.

After our marriage, I practiced knocking on the inside of our front door in case one day death came by. Oh, how its cadence made the timber sing, how that song burbled through my knuckles. After months of knocking back, I formed blisters. Nasty ones. Waiting to ooze into the gutter below the stoop. It was where forgotten things went. Where my drafts of his poems ended up with our shit-stained vows from our sidewalk wedding. Our landlord coated his fists with a substance to make his knocking louder, leaving traces of it to permeate through the grooves of the wood. My goosebumps raised to braille.

“Suddenly” wasn't how this city operated.

A bloodless ghost, I had been expecting to bleed a long time and come to pieces at the foot of Death's door. You had a metaphor for the mess. Had poems without the integrity that whole things have, that I once had. I wrote them to see if I could find myself in your words, how to be whole again and wholly yours. Sometimes I'd stick my hands out to show you where my wounds joined with the grooves. You'd take them to cover your mouth. My words again became yours. These were the same hands that tried to teach you about Love and Death. No more a subject than a silhouette, I was vague in your mind and cast in the shade of your heart. *My Dark Lady*, hanging like that ornament on a dying—no, already dead—cedar tree of vapid sympathies.

I didn't know what would do it. How hard I'd have to pound. The landlord had come by just the night before, so I was doing my thing the next morning, banging. He must've laced his knuckles with enough of that good-good to seep through the grooves. My blood was pooling, it all felt dangerous and sweet. Thrilling. This time, the pounding finally set my brains loose, my forehead split: widow's peak to nose. I turned to meet his eyes for the first time since we hitched the knot. No metaphor for this mess, his *Dark Lady*.

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