

Three Moments Upon Waking

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i. The Pageant, 1945

When I was five, my mother stood me on a dining room chair and used her best stick of mascara to paint a large blue star across my upturned face. Her breath filled my mouth as she tipped my chin up and held it steady with one finger, concentrating on her work. I got to wear my sister's Communion dress, white with a white satin sash, its crinolines crisp with dried sugar water. She fixed wings of gauze and stiff wire to my waiting shoulders, and on my feet, golden shoes.

I stood looking up at the ceiling, where I saw a stain. Once, my father brought home a hinged rectangular box covered in soft leather the color of a bird's egg, edged in gold filigree. When she opened it, the crystals filled the room with lights. I saw them, dancing there, where rain has leaked through and left its mark, the brown-edged map of an undiscovered island world.

When she had finished creating me, I walked to school. I saw a robin's egg splashed open on the sidewalk, a partially formed chick, bulging eyes sealed shut, its unfeathered body slick with a mysterious clear liquid. I had never seen the glistening white interior of a bird's egg before, how the blue shell looked like a nugget of soft summer sky that had formed, solid, and fallen down through the atmosphere, not like something spilled from a nest by a marauding cat.

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And then I accidentally stepped in a pile of dog mess that curled up around one golden shoe like warm, half-cooked fudge. I saw myself, a marked child set off to wander a long white path of squares that led all the way to St. Agnes', and felt that now my clothes wore me and I was being drawn forward by a star. I left white statues in my wake, so many little girls, crystalline mannequins, littering the landscape.

I imagined that when the parents in all their houses finally woke up and came out to lift the day's news from the dewy grass, they would see it everywhere, the evidence of change. But I was wrong. They noticed nothing.

ii. Sleeping Birds, 1965

They fall like oblong pebbles, like stuffed grape leaves, like objects not alive. The sun is just rising as she lifts the ladder from a notch of branches and accidentally dumps them, so many sleeping hummingbirds, fat little Cuban cigars, onto the grass.

She picks one up and cradles it, inert, in her palm. It wakes, unfolds itself, its chest a flash of iridescent green. Its wings, its tapering body, are tense with energy, vibrating. Its small head and beady eyes, its long tapered beak remind her that she is a foreigner, terrestrial. It wants to leave, take to the air, a waiting wilderness.

Before it is quite ready to set off, she wonders, should she give it something sweet to drink?

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iii. Watering Rocks, 1995

He believes his guest is still sleeping when he slides open the shoji screen and walks out into the garden alone.

He bows and kneels. He has knelt down here every day for fifty years. It will never be over.

Two of them, one larger, one smaller, touch, perfect granite spheres at rest on raked sand. He dips a cup at the end of a long slim handle into the water. He lifts it, pauses, then pours. She sees the dark stain. She feels as if her own fevered head, unprotected under a relentless August sun, begins to cool.

In a moment he dips a second time. Lifts. Pauses. Pours. The small stone changes color. Its mottled surface darkens and now they both have turned a smoky gray, as if a storm has come, as if an illuminated night has filled them and we can, for one moment, see what is inside.

Once, rushing, afraid, he ran past a woman who begged for water, a charred hand extended. He looked briefly into her eyes, in which he saw, too clearly, his own reflection, the ruined child silent in her arms, and fled.

His No a motion only.

He might as well have lifted them both onto his back and, stooping, carried them slowly with him into eternity.

Bodies floated down the boiling river.

She lay down at the end of the bridge with her child still in her arms and was quiet then.

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These are thirsty rocks. Their stony nature will never let them drink, find relief. Their perfect curves, twin earths seen from a distant moon, mimic what we all might lose.

He is not responsible. He did not make the fire.

Still, he cannot forget that he had a choice and left her, and her child, too. So he chooses again. Again, his choice is motion. The slow dipping of the long-handled cup into a pool of blue disturbs the surface calm of still water reflecting unblemished sky.

In this way she lifts him daily and, both her arms now full, carries him for all time through a watery darkness.

It is Japan. Of course it is Hiroshima.

His guest was not sleeping. She had heard something, a slight disturbance of air, and awakened. Standing just beyond the paper screen, her bare feet registering the cool of the damp grass, she saw him. He never knew. Now she will carry it back to America, the land of forgetfulness, this echoing bowl, memory.