

four poems by KAMI WESTHOFF

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OFFERINGS

My son is hard to please, his father says. His knife slices the ham's rind away in a perfect arc, taps free the cord of fat from its tip. His lips, glossed by the roll's butter, split to add, *But you seem like a good match*. The complement enters her system like aerosol. She quarters then eighths her ham, considers a sixteenth to keep her mouth pretty.

His mother warbles, as she seems to always do after her husband speaks. *He's quite a catch*, she says. Her palm cups her wine glass, lifts it like an irreplaceable. Cracks canyon the backs of her hands, exposes valleys of crimson. She refuses the ham, but potatoes and peas and green beans create a dramatic topography on her plate.

The son slips his hand under the table and pats his fiancé's thigh. This touch, never more intimate, tremors her skin long after he lifts a napkin to his mouth. He tells his father about the tint he's applied to the windows of his white mustang. He builds a mountain out of his potatoes, carves out a crater for his gravy.

His younger sister sits like a plant between her mother and brother. The bowls and platters end their rotation in front of her. Her arm lifts and lowers food and drink as though the air is viscous. She speaks in single syllables when spoken to. When her knife rests on her plate, she presses its tip between finger and nail until the blood offers.

RUMINATION

She wakes to the neighbor's bull bawling.
Identical bellows, deep and slobbery, escalate
into shriek. An electric fence the size of a wheat
stalk separates him from the cows. They gape at him,
mouths sloppy with spit and rumination,
slip tongues into slick nostrils.

The night before, Officer J.C. Livingston lay his card
on the counter, told her to call before she visits her husband speaks
at the station in the morning. *Don't bring the baby*,
he'd said slowly, as if his language wasn't her own.

She clips the baby's carrier to the headrest
of the passenger's seat. The baby is awake
but calm. Her bottom gum has relented
and a hole the size of a period pocks its smooth.
The baby stares at her with eyes the color of a lake
in December, veins quaking the whites.

The smell in the car is like an ear infection.
She looks under the seat and in the glove box,
finds only an umbrella and owner's manual. The bending
spasms her back stiff, pain writhes sacrum to occiput
from the night in the rocking chair. She breathes into
its tremor until it retreats into fascia, etches
into memory.

She drives past the field with the bull. The cows
have wandered into a distant field. The bull
has quieted for now, and sits, killing flies
with the snap of his tail, waiting for what his body
tells him is his to take.

CONJUGAL

Today is his first Once-A-Month, so she leaves the baby with its grandmother, drives east toward the mountains that crag the sky like a lie detector. She squirms against the fabric of her underwear where bumps erupt from the severed hairs. She refuses the car's lighted reminder to buckle up: even its light pressure against her bound breasts shocks her breath inward. The vanilla air freshener mingles with the scent of spit up and she feels the throb of two days earlier, when, rubber nipple to its lips, the baby screamed until crying became bark, then croak, then whisper.

At the gate of the facility, a man looks over her paperwork and buzzes her through. She checks herself in the rearview: lids and lashes clean, lips unlined. The women in the waiting room have faces like dough, eyes like hole-punches. Some are here out of love, some obligation, some fear. With stiff necks, they make guesses as to who belongs to the worst, translate wardrobe into weakness, slouch of shoulder into degrees of shame. They are all told they are part of the problem, but also part of the solution.

When the receptionist calls her name, she stands, but does not answer, her tongue swollen like a slug. His counselor has assured her the visits are necessary to his recovery, encouraged her to be what it is he wants. She is led down a hallway with lights like a migraine. When she dropped off the baby that morning, her mother had said, *You don't have to go. You don't owe him anything.*

He is pleased with her preparations. His *Thank you*, vibrates her thighs and volcanoes in her gut. He avoids her breasts, and she dissolves into this unintended kindness. She closes her eyes home again, where baby's whisper explodes into a scream she quiets with the flesh of her nipple.

STITCHES

Even with the car windows down,
she can smell him on her like a low tide.
There was a time when she craved this scent,
shocked beautiful because he'd chosen her instead
of the other women with bodies like fruit seconds
from the pick.

Memories from the visit flash like highbeams:
a coarse hair coils on her tongue,
bleach screams from the sheets,
fluorescent lights tick and flicker,
words throb monosyllabic against her throat.

She exits the interstate five miles early, drives
the road that scrapes the mountain on the right,
halos the bay on the left. She knows she won't
visit him again, but also that he will keep his promise,
muttered between her thighs, to never let her go.

The road narrows, veins her through a tunnel
ripe with rock, delivers her without harm or hope.
The moon, stuck in its sliver, relents, and the sea
stitches itself to the shore.