

Shutter

Nothing stills beneath your gaze unless you are a man with power. My father's looking was the rain of a storm rewinding itself into the clouds, a storm thinking twice of its havoc. My ex-boyfriend's camera, a handheld Medusa—how I hardened beneath it, and how he hardened with pleasure in response to my fear. The both of us shuttering ourselves against the other.

All little Black girls have been told to change for male company, have been aged with the knowledge of a man's wanting. What is comfort with a man mixed in? What was my body but a clean sheet of paper for others to inscribe their stories? In my own home, I was inappropriate. When my father's friends came over, *Girl, go put some clothes on*. In the command, my father's knowledge that a man will always look.

Those old Easters, do you remember? We shined with hair grease. All of the girls primped and pressed, dressed in lacy socks and skirts with crinolines to hold their shape. A smattering of overturned wine flutes in the pews. In church, our cleanliness was always mistaken for goodness. Some currency in how docile we were when touched, pinched, inspected; even this silence was for the approval of a male God.

I've always known that he who holds the camera has the say. The photographer says smile and I obey. The photographer knows magic because he motions how he wants me to shift my body and my body follows. Under the bright studio lights of the photoshoot, I begin to sweat—my body's largest rebellion.

My first trip to the museum was really a lesson in etiquette. *Do not touch, keep your voice down.* My mother took me to admire the art but the art was too busy watching me. Rooms of pale faces, gold plaques in which I saw my reflection scarred by the names of white men. The women did not smile. I gathered the courage to step up to *Girl with a Pearl Earring* as close as the black tape would let me. This imaginary woman stuck glancing over her shoulder, forced to meet every gaze she finds waiting.

Once, on a date in the Birmingham Museum of Art, my then boyfriend leaned in to squint at the details of a woman's breast. Said loudly, *Women were built so different back then.* A few paintings over, I gazed at a naked man, his flaccid penis on full display. I found no shame in his face and wanted to say so. My boyfriend sidled up next to me. *You know, looking at art reminds me that there are two types of people in this world. The watchers and the watched.* Between us, his question fell, unsaid; *Which one are you?*

When I moved to Cincinnati, I started to watch scary movies alone. It didn't keep me from talking myself through the jump scares or making shutters out of my fingers. In one movie, a woman is cuffed to a bed and another version of herself appears to taunt her. When a dark shadow smokes into the corner of her bedroom at nightfall, I cover my eyes and say aloud, *Who the hell is that?* I am surprised when no one answers.

I'm still not used to living alone. Once, at night, I scared myself walking past the television. I didn't think I could cast a shadow with so little light. And yet there I was, a shapeless ghost blacker than the black of the sleeping screen. *Shit, it's just me*, I said, as if that soothed the fear. As if I could not haunt myself.

When I look at myself now, I'm really just squinting to see who I am through glass. I take a selfie and the girl in the picture is not me. Some days I dance in the mirror and cannot catch her imitations—she's gotten too damn good at copying my moves.