MISTINGUETTE SMITH

Roba: a cycle of four poems

Roba, Alabama

Today the trees were alive with men.
In ordered rows they beat and shook
down pecans the color of my mother’s hands.
The sun was barely up, but thin cotton shirts hung damp
upon their hollow chests and fell from their shoulders
like wings. They worked wordlessly, long poles
prodding the orchard to give up her seed, basket
upon willow basket. Their arms were shadows in the trees.
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Cora

His hands, they was pretty as a lady’s hands, nails clean and white as the first sliver of new moon. When he first touch me, it was soft, like a child wanting something, afraid to ask.

Mama didn’t want him coming ’round, hoped to keep me out they kitchens and arms’ reach. But this here is his land, and he say my skin is the color of earth. I don’t know if he mean that I’m dirty or that I belong to him. Mama was born in freedom, so she say we don’t belong to no one but the Lord. But she don’t complain when he come around with things: fresh buttermilk, soft cotton cloth, some night blooming flowers for her garden. Pa saw the new flannels on the bush outside the yard, told Mama, Cora a woman now. Mama cried, and Pa took her in his willow basket arms.
Ware, Dreaming

Ware tilts his face back beneath a straw hat that smells like violets and brilliantine. He’s thinking about that girl again, the one who makes him feel baptized, clean makes him want to come in the world new to be a gift, or a man, something useful and holy. His own life has slipped him like a silver watch chain through his waistcoat pocket and buttonhole:

family duty, wife and son, two hundred acres of pecans own him six days a week. On Sunday he will go to see the man who drives his other pickers in a language he can barely understand: to know by touch when the fruit is green and when it will fall, gathered easily.

A man with hands that know things. Him, and his daughter, Cora, who stops that chain from slipping. Lately, the wife complains of things gone missing: a ladle, a tortoiseshell pin.
She knows there is something out of place
but can’t name what or find it. Ware sits
on the veranda winding a watch on a silver chain,
waiting for Sunday evening to be born again.
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New Room

He calling me all the time now: Cora, fetch me a pillow, bring a little water. When I finally come up, he don’t want nothing, just to tie up his fingers in plaits of my hair.

Up here, it look like heaven. I climb ’round and up the new-laid stairs, my Jacob’s Ladder. Clean and white, they smell like timber and turpentine. Everything is new, even the air that moves these ghosty curtains in and out like breaths nobody ever took before. You see, he ’sleep before I even make that top step. So I watch. I likes to watch him, still like that,

hands spread across the quilt I made, big enough for the big dark bed, our bed. The light come in real strong in the afternoon, the slanted window makes a square across the floor.

I stand in it to watch him move his busted ribs in and out. Each breath, it hurts him. It hurts me, too. My shadow put a hand to her side but her belly too big to find the place where he got broken. Fell off the roof. But not before he finish this new room. Addition he call it, but I climb to this place ’cause nothing here is added ’cept for what I bring
to him. *I see you standing there*, he say. I jump.
Awake, his eyes stare blue as squares of sky
outside that window. I wonder, do he see, like me,
a world he made with his own body, full of so much light?

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**Author’s Note:**

*This was my grandfather’s story, meant
to tell me who he came from, who I am.
Beautiful, this story, and untrue.
Perhaps he longed for me to slip
beyond the common, brutal fact
of just another Black girl’s body pinned
beneath a white man’s power to stop time.*