



IN
THE
BOROUGH
OF
QUEENS

Jessalyn Wakefield

What was she doing there. (Hello. How are you? I am here.) Any story would have been an explanation. Any story would have been fine. (I wanted to come. I mean. I wanted to go. That's how I always was with you, wasn't I. And I was like that then, too.) Licked her lips. Ah. She was there.

What does it mean to go East? She was a legitimate child of California. Birthed by California's own hands, crown pulled from between California's heaving legs and with her forehead still slick with bloody mucous kissed by California's brightest star and consort, the Sun himself : to go East : what dishonor was that. What place did she have there. (It had nothing to do with place.) Only that there was a compulsion and she allowed it to compel her. (What am I doing here. Ah. Here I am.) There was nothing else she could have done. It was consensual, then.

Licked her lips. Still a thin grain of frosting. "I like to keep the house dirty," he said to her. "I want a real New York experience."

Pressed her palms to the counter. She could feel the crumbs biting : the dead mouths of ants. Grease oozed into the creases. (I could hate you so easily. Not you. I don't mean you. I mean him. I could hate him, so easily. Or could have.) Can't keep food in this house. Can barely keep your body in this house.

(Whatever shape it may take. Even if that shape is the shape of silence.) They were not wounds but bedsores. On her head. (Hi. How are you. I have grown gluttoned on dreams. There are new people I dream beside now. In the morning they tell me different dreams than you would. But when I was in Queens, I dreamt alone.) The metals. In her mouth. The taste of each. She would put each metal in her mouth to taste and to consummate the taste. Copper. Iron. Tin. Platinum. (Know this in the way that I know the metals : I do not belong, but I love you. I do not belong to you but I love you. Even if the best shape is the shape of silence.)

His smile was broad and showed all his fat teeth. A roach weaved across the counter QUICK, and QUICK his thumb shot down, a manicured arrow, and the legs squirmed and the shell squeaked. Cracked open. The roach dragged its slick wound a little further across the counter and stopped at the impasse of a crumb. She nodded : very very slowly : he smiled and put his thumb inside his smile.

When she went home to California she burned his photographs. Burned the effigy of his blonde locks. The pictures were difficult to destroy. They would not stay lit. She didn't think to use lighter fluid. So she struck match after thin match, until finally they were wet ash in her kitchen sink and the air made her thirsty with the sulphur.

But before that.

She ate CAKE that summer. CAKE CAKE CAKE. Like consuming children. Pretty baby CAKES, dressed up like little girls. One small CAKE a day, petite and yellow and polka dotted. Tiny forkfuls but : QUICKLY QUICK QUICK : would leave the restaurant or the dinette or the café still chewing, still forcing throatfuls of sweet frosting downward, pleading with gravity : O please, this swallow : O please.

CAKE CAKE CAKE. Once she changed it. Once and only once she bought a slice of thick chocolate CAKE with coagulated frosting, a treat heavy as the humid air outside. She ate it in the same way she ate the small yellow CAKES with the fluffy white polka dots, smooth and QUICK. When she was finished she vomited between her legs onto the floor of the café and the vomit splashed up her legs. Up her skirt. Splattering like all things that splash up and down women's skirts : rain, mud, bird shit, coffee, semen : the same astonishing geography : she left the café with the waiters saying, nearly moaning, 'O my God O my God' and she did not apologize and she did not tip the waiters and when she got outside she vomited again, splashed up her skirt again and again, until there was only air, only air like heavy CAKE splashing

up her skirt, only the heavy air from her belly, only the heavy air splashing onto her thighs.

(Whatever shape it may take. Even if that shape is the shape of silence.) They were not wounds but sores. On her head. (O hey. It's you. Guess what. You'll never guess. I have grown glutted on dreams.) The water of the borough was full of metals and they poisoned her. But she had grown to know the taste of what was poisoning her.

He was the first man she watched trains with. (Before I knew you I watched trains with him and he was from New York, just like you. And I was in New York, too, and what do you think I was doing so far East, huh?) She would go outside the house and take her body with her. Go outside and her body would sweat. Her skin felt like a membrane not of skin but of the sky : humid : the sky her skin, now, and when it rained she would not take his umbrella but would let it soak her. Let it soak her to her skin that is already the sky, as if the rain were returning to the sky, as if she was the sky once more. Feel her nipples go erect against the cotton of her sopping shirt and feel him watching their metamorphosis. Watching the bloom become seed. He still offering the umbrella like a black candle.

His lips were too full and soft looking. (That's it. Because I hated his mouth. He was the first man I hated. Or understood that I did.) Too plump and pink. Like a cold shrimp. Like a woman's mouth. And dear God, women are easy to hate.

(Before I knew you I watched trains with him. And I cannot believe I never told you. Not even once.) She would take showers when the sweat was too rank on her body. Ugly cold showers, showers that gave headaches. By the time she was dressed she would be rank with sweat again, would have already soaked her still cool clothes.

The shape of this place is one hundred years old. That's all. (Do you know the outline of this city? Could you walk the borders with me? Tonight could we just trace that shape, there is

nowhere in this place that is dark : there is nowhere in this place that is not one hundred years old.)

In the borough of Queens that steel color was spread swollen above them and below : those two thin strips of steel running, that color reflected and reflected back, flowing upward from the earth to the air, and staining, stained. From that bridge the edges of each piece of gravel were in sharp relief, every piece like a wolf's eye, sharp and perfectly round, and she hated that mouth with its solid teeth. The hue of his lips like exposed female flesh. Like female lips barred in snarl. Pearl in the teeth or pearl stitched across the lips. The grey moving. (O is this motion.) The shape of the grey molding the light on the silver flanks of the trains. Sensual steel, hunched tight and round and snarling, seductive panther haunches. They stood in the borough of Queens with their cameras, photographing the trains through the chain link. (I never once told you. And everything about you was trains. Those long hours spent in worship of freights. You strange skinny bird whom I nursed. What was I thinking. Giving milk to a bird.) She took his picture, under the grey banner of rain, and decided after she took the pictures that she would burn them.

He bought her a scone every morning from the Irish bakery. Two quarters rustled from his pocket. He would place the sweet gently in her cupped palms. The bakery was under the train : that platform like an altar high above the streets : all those people, waiting, to sacrifice themselves to the city. Chewy currants and thick buttery dough. And she innocent of what it meant when he bought her a pastry. (Do you think he still eats? I photographed him eating and I burned that photograph. Tell me, how is it possible for him to still feed himself if I have destroyed all evidence of his mouth filled with food. If I have destroyed his mouth.) She climbed the steps in cadence with his strides, swallowing, and then waited on the platform, waited with the rest of them, in offering. She could vomit the taste of any metal when she stood beside him on the platform. Her palms open and loose,

suspended a breath away from her thighs. The air between the palm and the thigh shimmering like frosting on CAKE inside a cool glass bell.

(Do I still write to you, then? Is this what I am doing?)

His fingers were soft, too, when he touched her. He touched her after he poured white wine into glasses. He talked about the wine and the pads of his fingers swirled around her arm while the wine swirled in the glass. The apartment was still filthy and the light was greasy and harsh.

“I want to cook you a meal with marijuana,” he said. “Pasta maybe, maybe I’ll put it in the sauce. Not to get you high. I want you to know the flavor.” He placed his fingertips on her skin. Harder this time. As if to disprove his own softness. Seeking flesh. And bruised flesh. (It was a beginning, then. It was an aleph. It was an A. It was the severed head of an ox I did not know I held upside down.) She smiled at him : very very slowly : there was nothing else she could have done.