

## CARDINALS

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*Michaela Walsh*

He sleeps hot. And he dreams of things past. The girl beside him sleeps close, in repose of dream wandering through the soaking night in flight. They sleep in a tangle of sheets and from where the girl is she can hear the man grinding his teeth, making small noises that come from someplace far in his throat, haunting, like a hurt dog or a lost wolf.

He sleeps with fever. And he dreams of things past. The girl beside him sleeps close until she rolls away from him, too hot, his dreams too much. She can feel them in his skin, the way his heart quickens against her back, how he holds her tight, grinding his teeth and making small noises that come from someplace far inside of him. She rolls away to the cooler side of bed in a repose of dream wandering through a soaking night in flight, unaware that from where he lies tangled in sheets, he is doing the same.

From the window the frosty moon keeps watch.

And winter's cold rises up through the floorboards of their small apartment and the wind hits itself against the windows like a lost bird and the girl, from where she lies on the edge of the bed, dreams of doves who are embroidered with colorful thread dancing across the blankets, trilling a tune that she understands as a call for warmth.

Because now she is cold.

Winter on top of the girl like a ghost, her nakedness white under the moon, and in her dream of doves she rolls back into the arms of the man who draws her close to his chest so that all night she can feel his heat and his heart as though they were her own. Sometimes in her sleep the girl takes his hand and walks with him, old friends across a play ground of sand and swings, and sometimes when she awakes from the cold or the heat or from his tears on her neck the girl will study his face and puzzle over the movement behind his eyelids, and it is a feeling of estrangement because he is so far, and the only way to join him is to search out sleep where once again she can take the man's hand.

He has no country. He has no place. He runs back and forth between the taiga of winter and the tundra of desert.

When he awakes the girl is sleeping. A weak winter light enters through their window, spreading shadow across the bed. She is half covered by blankets lying on her stomach and from the way one leg rises and one arm extends above the head, it looks as though she is climbing. The man touches the side of her face, smooth with youth, her hair, and he leans forward to smell her neck, soft. He sits beside the girl and watches her. Regarding her with a feeling that is love he doesn't wonder what she dreams. He does not want to remember what he has dreamed.

He is a handful of seeds scattered in a soil that will never receive him. He has no country. He has no place. He travels between the taiga of winter and the tundra of desert and the streets that he knew are not the same and the people that he knew have no tongues and close their eyes when they see him.

The man who is inside the safety of morning, who has been running all night, covers the girl fully before pulling on his shirt and pants and moving into the kitchen where he heats up a cup of coffee and reads the paper.

He is on the ground. He is wet with his blood. Naked, on his knees, staring at their black boots, waiting for them to leave so that he can curl into himself and imagine that he is a pill bug, protected by the soil. He closes his eyes and he sees necklaces of tongues like tiny pieces of leather strung around the soldiers' necks. Strangled. He is contained inside of gray walls and at night it is so cold that he holds himself and shakes until sleep with its hostility, with its freedom, with its hatred and sometimes with its love, takes over his body.

The girl will awake after the man has left. At noon, just before the whistle, when the sun has gathered more momentum and the shadows are stronger, spidering further now across the room. The man is at work, kneading clay into earthen bowls to be burned in a wood fire. He is moving the clay, at first cold and then with more of his touch, warm, until he has created delicate little bowls that he knows risk cracking under such heat. He imagines their glaze as he sculpts them. The color of abalone and pearl. The lapis lazuli of the mallard's neck. The color of autumn melting across clay.

The bowls the man makes are thin. And he knows that they risk cracking under such heat. But as he molds warmth into the clay and thinks of the girl, standing now, naked under the shower, mouth open to receive the water, he thinks of delicacy and fragility and how these things can make us cry because they are so beautiful or so ugly, and without thinking, the man begins to sculpt the girl.

In her blue bathrobe she eats a bowl of watermelon at the window. She tastes summer and it is wet in her mouth and the girl understands that the seasons are layered together, that deep inside of the earth there is warmth, a harboring of spring. Further, summer, with its yellow skies and angry storms and those early mornings spent sweating with the man in a movement of thirst and longing and strange fulfillment under faded sheets the color of a gray sky. Ache of thunder against the windows. Ache of each other against themselves. The girl swallows the shiny black seeds of the watermelon and thinks of gardens. She thinks of the man with his strong hands pulling at the soil, dirt on his knees, and as she joins him

on the ground to plant the seeds for their vegetables and flowers, the girl sees that he is crying.

Rising to put the bowl in the sink and to dress for the day the girl wipes the tears from his face and his cheeks become smeared from the earth that is on her fingers.

How do I know you? he asks her sometimes. When she is on the couch under the blanket reading. When they are walking and she pauses to touch the bark of a tree, says something to him about it being the color of the man's eyes. How do I know you? he asks her when she calls to him from the bathtub because she is thirsty and would like a glass of water.

It was the first thing he said to her. In the bookstore next to the creek where ivy spindles its ways up the walls of the old brick building. She was sitting behind the counter leaning against a shelf of books reading *The Sunrise Ruby* and when the man walked in, fall wind following him, she looked up from what she read and smiled. "If I can help you find anything," she said, "let me know." The man, unzipping his coat, nodded his head, and the girl watched him as he wandered into a different room and then she returned to her reading.

Sunday. Sometimes the girl would fall asleep in her chair, the music on the radio, jazz, lulling her away from the words that she read into fleeting dream. Outside October and the trees alight with cardinals in camouflage. Singing.

The man who stood in front of the counter watched her as she slept. Small lips parted slightly. Flushed face. Hands on top of the book resting on her chest. He studied her face, how young, how open, and he wondered for a moment the color of her eyes, and then not wanting to wake her he quietly set the books on the glass counter top and wandered into the dusty light of another room to sit in a chair by the window and read until she awoke. All day he had walked. To the grocery store to buy berries and cream for his cereal. To the park where he walked with the hussshhh hussshhhh of leaves under foot, the smell of earth from last night's rain like promise.

Sunday. Birdsongs, leaf songs, and a happiness welling inside of his heart under the color of such a season. October and the trees alight with cardinals in camouflage. Singing.

The man hadn't been into the bookstore since the Spring, last snow leaning on tulips, and the girl had only begun working there that summer.

When he walked up the stairs of the old brick building with ivy creeping up the walls, the man wasn't thinking about the sad part of fall. How the color takes to the trees like fever, slowly infecting leaves with a flush that becomes ignited as the cold comes in, whispering warnings of winter that we dismiss with pumpkins and apple pie and the opening of first preserves from July. He wasn't thinking that in a month it would be November drawing color from the leaves until there were no leaves, only sad trees reaching naked for the sky, surrendered, the rain and the gray skies saying "Take Heed, you have weathered nothing." When the man walked into the bookstore, he was thinking about strawberries. The girl behind the counter leaning against the shelves read a book, and she smiled at him as he unzipped his coat, and he felt before the girl said anything that he knew her.

The girl had no idea how long she had been asleep. She watched the man cross the room, two books in his hands. There was a different program on the radio and some books on the counter and in front of her now, the man, who cocked his head and said to her, "How do I know you?"

The girl, still shy from sleep, regarded him for a moment. A short man, skin the color of wood, eyes the color of amber, curly black hair, a blue jacket.

"You don't," she answered.

He shook his head, unwilling to accept her answer. Adding the two books under his arms to his stack on the counter before her, he looked up at the girl, a penetrating look that made her feel uncomfortable, and he asked, "You never took a ceramics class?" and then "from me?" Soft voice. An accent.

She shook her head. Began to ring up the books at the register.

"You look familiar."

The girl shrugged, put the books in a bag, and then sliding them towards the man told him that she was sure that she did not know him.

And he, standing before her, bag of books in hand, wanting badly to talk to the girl who he felt a closeness to before having heard her speak, before speaking to her, sensed her discomfort, and said goodbye. From her perch behind the counter the girl watched the man zip up his coat and then with his books, leave the store. Fall wind entering the room when he opened the door.

"How do I know you?" he still asks. In between the sheets, in his sleep, on the way to the store to buy cream and berries for his cereal.

Always the girl tells him, "You don't."

But he is sure.

That he knows her. Had met her before he walked into the bookstore in October. He knew it before he watched her as she slept, reclined in the chair, arms folded across the book that was on her chest. Lips slightly parted, faced flush, the sound of the cardinal in camouflage outside the window, and some long lovely sighs from a saxophone spilling from the radio and filling the room in a salutation to the laziness of Sunday. He knew. And he would think of her sometimes, although it wasn't until it was cold with January and a listlessness that the man returned to the store to see the girl. Sitting behind the counter, book in hand, heavy green sweater that made her eyes bright, the color of eucalyptus, he thought.

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"Hello," he said.

"Oh, hello. I haven't seen you in some time," she said.

Snow beginning to fall outside and a quiet encircling the man and the girl in the old book shop as each began to open up to the other until outside it was a five o' clock sky and time for the girl to turn off the lights, lock the doors, and begin her walk home. But the girl, who didn't want to go home to her dark apartment to leftover spaghetti and the cold, preferred the store because its wooden walls insulated with books, illuminated by lamps from all over the world, was comforting. And what the man was saying about music, the flight of fingers on the

piano and how it is the only thing that makes him truly happy evoked a feeling of compassion in the girl that she didn't even recognize until after she had told him that it was time to go, and reluctantly, half an hour past closing, turned off the lights and locked the doors.

Outside and the dark descending and the snow descending and the girl watching the man walk in the opposite direction, shadows of his footprints showing his direction, and a quiet want welling inside of her to follow him.

The girl removes her bathrobe and puts on her clothes, violin filling the apartment as she dresses. When she leaves, she leaves the music on. Remembering dreams, the girl walks to work following her breath, wondering about flight.

The man, from where he sits holding clay, is thinking about mountains. Human. Bent shoulders and back, the ache of the weight of such sky. Hips rising above cloud. He holds the curves of the mountain, the people, the woman, in his hands. For years now he has been running. The man from where he sits holding clay the color of roots, rust, holds the woman, and as he finds the curves of her body, the slope of her shoulder, the strength in her back, the rise of her waist as she lies on her side with her back towards him, he remembers his dream of two embroidered birds walking across his chest as he slept.

"How do I know you?" he asks.

From where she sits in the book shop watching winter out the window, the girl feels the soft pressure of his fingers on her temples. The heat of his breath, on her neck. His presence like a shadow behind her. Always the girl tells him, "You don't."