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The First Drink

Maureen Seaton

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The night swells around us.
Our voices, tense with lightning,
create a new silence.
Tree frogs surrender their bows,
crickets hush. Your shadow
emerges among the fireflies,
soft-edged, reflecting the moon.
I start, as if seeing you
for the first time, ask myself:
Who's the arrow and who's the swan?

THE FIRST DRINK

My mother stands in the doorway,
always leaving. She thinks
I'm a woman. Her face shows this—
how odd. I'm four years old
or less. The scene: Grandma's
kitchen, my father, his lap, me.
The choice: him or her. My heart
empties soundlessly. I need her
but she never touches me.
The kitchen seems to shrink when she leaves
like some hot air balloon dying.
Objects take on life like that:
street signs, trees. I hear everything scream. I'm careful with everything.
The piano hurts when I touch it.
The glass angel feels lonely
when I leave the room. I can't bear
the cries of animals or babies.
I'm seven years old, careful
not to crease my communion dress
or bite the body of Christ. When they
say the word sin, I believe them.

Late October: I bleed for the first time,
ruin my Halloween costume.
I want to lay my head in my father's
lap, absorb his equilibrium,
but he thinks I'm a woman now,
screams at me to cover myself. His fear
is an undertow that drags him away. The years
grow between us like bad children.

I spend reckless weekends
before an eternal candle and gilded wafer
they call God, starve my flesh
to fine points, hard planes.
At sixteen, the first drink goes down
like a flame: purifying, hot.
I feel the answers flood my toes,
the promise seize my brain
like sunlight in a corner of hell.