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Penelope Joanna

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Bonnie Jacobson

PENELOPE JOANNA

Once a year Joanna's husband leaves her.
Packs his gear and sails north, in need of setting out
and returning. His friends go too.
Sometimes they see a bear, or dream they do.
Once, on a wilderness island, they knelt
for an hour and watched a snake eat a frog,
its bleat last in. That night they asked themselves
important questions, but drank too much
to remember the answers. He guesses they
spoke of the war, and women, stories Joanna
does not want to hear, he informs her,
and rolls over and turns off the light.
Once, Joanna's husband was seized from
his ship and rushed to an insolent port.
There, he was stripped and shaved hairless
as an Arab bride, he was painted yellow
and cracked like an almond and entered.
He woke a zero, a poor Pinocchio
dangled from wires, a fetus, reborn at last
but wheeled home, the child of his wife.
Yes you may, no you may not, she chirped.
One night while she slept, he slipped from
her slipcovered rooms, he leapt her hedges
and ran off to sea, thrusting north, ice on his beard—
Oh where has he gone, his poor wife cried,
my little hibiscus, my delicate boy—