Amulets

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AMULETS

Riddled by seaworms, the figurehead’s blind unsurprised eyes gaze past a tattooed sailor’s hide, brindled with waves & fish, spreadeagled on the wall, this coastal town museum. Clumsy dioramas, ivory birdcages, the instruments of celestial navigation. Down gallery, in her battered leather jacket, I watch Emily & her daughter kneel to spy through miniature isinglass windows. An immense dollhouse: each parlor, bedroom & hallway opening to surprise, a mansion of possibility, each salver & bannister burnished to perfection. The latest t-cell count report crumpled in her pocket, she points to a tiny muslin gown draping a chair as if just shrugged from someone’s shoulders freshly risen from sleep’s farthest shore, the shapes that flit there—a man scarified with tidal waves & floral demons, a harpy carved to plunge like a diving horse from the ship’s prow through an ocean of ice. I need some amulet, those charms we made as girls of locks scissored from each other’s hair because mere faith did not seem harbor enough in a world of brute possibility.

Or these pendants & bracelets woven entirely of human hair. Storms of it—chestnut, auburn, eternally growing, blue-sheened black, ashen blonde pulled from brushes, combs, soaked & dried, combed & knotted, shellacked
with yellow sealing wax. Talismans.
The ill-typed card of explanation warps
through the glass case, currents & bubbles
rippling the whirr of voices diminuendoed
when I close my eyes to watch, like vision,

half-remembered, pulled from dream,
black mares beneath their plumes dragging
a cortège, crepe-hung, through heavy pearled
sands, a stinging hiss of ocean swallowing
one more name, some pestilence, women

letting down storms of wavy hair, though it’s only
a sepiaed photo I’m recalling, Grandmother
& her sisters with their jewel names,
Opal, Ruby, Sapphire, posed in a parlor
for tableaux vivante—the Graces

with their billowing knee-length tresses, loose
white gowns, but I should have thought of them
as Fates, the trio set afloat beyond
the farthest shores lofting pearl-handled scissors
against whole skeins of thread. Gale-force winds

rattle locks, breathe ragged around the walls
like black horses laboring through sand, fears
given form, phantoms a child might magically
appease. We did it all wrong. Emily, who says
she’s never felt looked over, never been

protected, or spared. What I hear is
her laughter, the child’s long aspirant ahhh
of wonder. What I need is some talisman, an amulet,
the old cosmology with its crystalline
perfection of shells around the world, celestial
frictive music to navigate by. Who'd want to surrender? Skies pearled cold, the sea’s lullaby crooned in the shell of the ear, I know, the houses scrawled by moonlight down the hill, salted around the bay frozen to filligree, smooth floes of ice. Nervous hands twisting, Emily braids her long hair, rich as a mare’s tail cascading, scars mapping each vein with the addict’s tatoo: her immune system’s failing.

How do I place them standing like figures in a glass case, shore’s edge where sand pearls beneath the dome of stars—a world safe & comprehensible? How is a spell woven, like these jewels, through the hours’ twilit progress?

Braids ovalling silhouettes meant for wearing like holy medals against bare skin. Starbursts, whorls inspiralled as the heart of a nebula, charms meant to cheat fate, to stay the journeyer a little while longer, who’ll never pass this way again.