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When You Say Infidelity

it sounds like something in the garden
planted beside foxglove, forget-me-not.
It is not beautiful
but your friends will recognize
the stems and furry leaves, hungover,
may even whisper its Latin name.
How would we classify it?
A border plant?
One that prefers shade?
How to describe the bloom?
The species you are most likely to find
thrives anywhere, the guidebooks will say
under the cozy light of a neighbour's kitchen,
in Best Westerns, close to the nearest exit,
at the party where I play
piano. Upstairs on a guest bed
I find you with a friend, I'll call Margery.
My Margery. If it were a movie,
I could close my eyes.
Later walk in the garden.
Margery planting roots
in that hard place between
the heart and a bad day
or above the trellis
thin and reserved in this light
where infidelity now hangs.

Dig

She must've worked it out the way
you'd fetch the knotted drawstring
partway out of a pair of stretchpants,
pinching off a bit of the material
at a time, coaxing the cord's end
backwards towards the drawhole
then reaching in with tweezers
for the knot, or, in this case, the end
of my left ring finger, snipped off
while I bent over to check
the front doorsill lock of a DC-10.
That would be something to see:
a full half-inch of severed digit
brought to light by stages after
spoiling a perfectly good glove.
How could she pass that up after
noting the glove in our hall closet
in the pocket of my work parka,
a fortnight into my convalescence?
This woman who has trouble
watching an ant being flattened,
who scolds when I clap my hands
to make crows fly up from our lawn,
maneuvers the pulp backwards
towards the glove's elasticized top,
letting it plop into the toilet, where
she notes for my averted gaze
the little white filament of nerve
trailing out behind it like a vestigial
tail on a new kind of pollywog.

Southward to Kissimmee

I

Our preference was for you to mellow
in well heated rooms. We would see
to the vegetables — keep them dry
in the cellar beneath the dining room,
and during our visits we would watch
your drop cookies congealing as they cooled.
We expected you to tolerate your fate
the way you would an uninvited guest —
civilly with cubes of cheddar cheese
on cracker rounds, with last year's
Christmas cake and lots of well boiled tea.
We thought that you would ease
yourself compliantly into a lazy-boy
with pockets for fliers and crossword books.
Reclining there would make it easier
to watch the nightly news, and even
as the world declined before your dimming
eyes, at least we knew that with
a calmly aimed remote, you could
flick aside the crime, the burning,
and all the faces of the day's destruction.

II

Instead,
your imagination shatters daily
into image bits that whirl like fortune's wheel
and ratchet by us louder than our reasonable voices.
Your perturbations spin like lottery balls
flung into prizeless sequences.
We ought to have known that you would kaleidoscope the world,

that you would run from the yellowish glow of sweet-sad memory,
lacy and strong as antiques to the nose.

Can we blame you for cursing the softness of carpets
vacuumed when they needn't be?

Comfort may be the last thing on your mind.

So, go ahead, let your distractions fly,
ragged and streamered as the clutter of sales
in mega-stores and malls.

Or over rye and ginger on a Saturday night
with neighbours telling naughty jokes,
we wish you a really good Legion band.

What do we know of the loss,
the oh, so tremendous loss of never again
in January loading up a floaty Ford
and heading southward to Kissimmee,
befriending desk clerks at cheap motels all along the coast?

Two *Bathshebas* in the Louvre*

I.

The breasts make contact with you first, the face —
pretty, oh yes — recedes into the unseen, as
the red eyes of the breasts
invite
floodlight on her deshabelle.
If she can read
you wouldn't know it,
pretty earrings too
a shoulder to be lightly
brushed
yes, you'll take this one
she says "take me" — letter from her dead past
dangling from her little hand — she says
"Only *you* exist
now, *you're* the king
take me" —
a real pin-up this one and you'll
take her
(sucker).

II.

Someone kneeling
to wash a woman's feet, that's all
some androgynous old domestic, maybe,
head covered in cardinal
red and the woman entirely
naked, not
nude, you can't not
look at her
face

and beyond the face
an entirely naked
woman and you can't not
look
on her private, not
to be spoken thought, you can't
take her, you're
with her in her knowing
solitude, in the space
where two sometimes stay
beside one another, not
fleeing, not
speaking, in the space
where it can't be
helped
you lower yourself
to see, you
listen with your eyes, you
watch a man entirely
helpless, tender, powerful,
kneel
at his companion's feet
to take her
flesh in his hands and brush
her with his
painter's
consolation

She supports her weight
on one large, ringless hand (you know
those wailing fingers) she's been
nailed
by the letter the other hand holds, its corner
clotted with the king's seal. Not
a young thing — her widened navel that,
despite yourself, you look to as an

eye, has been stretched.
Her body won't let you
forget its past, a body made
in time, for all time,
Bathsheba between men, between
masters, Bathsheba,
(*"Oh Hendrickje!"*)
(and you), by this painter
faithfully
beloved.

* The first painting, "Bathsheba Reading a Letter from David," is by Willem Drost (known only as Rembrandt's pupil) c.1630-1680. The second was painted by Rembrandt in 1654. Hendrickje Stoffels, Rembrandt's housekeeper, and the model for this work, was charged that same year by the Council of the Reformed Church with having "shamed herself by fornication with Rembrandt" and was forbidden to take communion.