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The Gift of Blood / Le Sang donné

Blood

Dominique Russell

Il s'agit ici d'explorer les différents sens que revêt le sang pour une jeune fille. Le sang comme signe de vie ou de fertilité, comme blessure, comme test médical ou comme lien familial trace en pointillé les moments significatifs d'une vie. Mais ces événements appartiennent aussi à la vie sociale qui leur confère d'autres sens, tout aussi bien ceux de l'alliance symbolique que de la contamination.

that euphemism for what moves in us
Anne Michaels

I

He wet his hands in my blood, painted his cheeks, like war paint. His face masked in concentration, reddened and estranged as he entered me. He wanted to prove: fearlessness, not devotion.

II

Everyday they'd come to take my blood. A small tube, a butterfly needle. The tubes fill slowly, the blood dark blue. Twenty years later I still have the veins of a drug addict. A doctor took it once. He's out of practice, though, and he's snaking the needle inside my arm, trying to hit a vein. "Stop laughing," he says. "You're shaking." The next day my arm is bruised, a purple stain that reaches to my bicep.

III

I liked the taste of it, the slightly metallic sweetness. I liked how it took a second, after the scab was torn off, for it to bubble up. Sometimes I'd let it run, still absorbing the sting, and watch it make patterns on my leg. Other times I'd suck the drop when it was at its thickest, its red pure and condensed. With regular picking you could keep a wound going for months.

IV

The blood running off his arm is viscous. It hardly drips at all. He is the most visibly injured among us and the doctors seem to be treating him right there in the waiting room. It must have been a farming accident, some machine that crushed his arm in rows of mangled, oozing triangles. My mother grips me in her arms a little tighter. He catches my eye and his face relaxes into a smile that he holds, for me, I think, as the nurse and doctor blot the blood, consider what to do.

V

Blood gushes from his face onto a pool on the sidewalk. He is drunk, AIDS-thin, a mixture of insolence and need in his look. He runs his hand under his chin intermittently, splattering the blood. He needs a firmer hand to stop the bleeding. I stand a ways away, watching.

VI

My mother empties the bathroom wastebasket as often as I drop bloodied napkins — rolled in layers of tissue, returned to their individual plastic wrappings — into it. I keep the boxes in my room, try to keep from contaminating the house (Do I smell? Am I leaking?). "Well, it's uncomfortable," she tells me, "for your father."

VIII

I can't give. Childhood illness bars me from contributing to the blood supply. My cousin, when she was a nurse with the Red Cross, told me not to bother. Her patients sometimes fainted as she shook the freshly filled bags in front of them. She took blood from my brother when he was alive, and he told me how brisk she was, happily professional. He had the interchangeable blood type and they'd call him, in emergencies, to donate. Then he died, and my cousin's daughter got the childhood illness. She won't donate either, the whole of her long life.

VII

Suddenly curious for his blood I bite his lip. I would puncture his neck where the skin is thicker, the pleasure more intense. But he overtakes me, pins me down, and I'm lost to him. His half-smile of possession and irony. I call out love; understand: the longing for children, the permanent and inseparable mingling of blood.