

Self Portraits

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I. At Six

At six I still wetted my uniform.
The school nurse muttered
“some people have no self-control”
before handing me a tattered
but clean dress. She put the soiled one
in a red plastic bag
as if it was a dead fish
bought from the wet market
at dusk, where hawkers exchanged last words,
not wanting to close business.

There were those who cycled
and those who ran. But I,
I walked home in dread.
I do not remember if I hummed a tune,
or thought of afternoon snacks.
All I can remember was the smelly bag,
next to my skin. I carried it close to me.
I had birthed it, given it scent.

II. At sixteen

Yes, some flowers attract flies.
(My mother was determined to make me see reason.)
They are foul-smelling. But you are not.
So why do you trap this fly?
You deserve bees, butterflies, birds.

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I ignored her.
Love does not need to be sweet
when you are young.

III. At twenty-six

I remember the silhouettes of imagined ghosts,
at night, perching on curtains:
motionless, constant.
They waited for me to sleep
so I could dream some more of them.

In truth I knew they mocked me.

In bed, I wriggled, pulled hair.
Sometimes I screamed.
The itchiness on my back
came without curtseying,
came precisely timed.

My back was scarred. My arms, my legs.
I was a sick woman. Elephant woman.
I just wanted to sleep.
I didn't want to flutter or twitch,
like a trapped butterfly
in a mayonnaise jar.

It was the eighth doctor who found me a cure.
I was to cover myself, head to toe,
in cream that smelt of dry bones.
And for months, I wore old clothes,
did not make love. I gathered words
to lie to my mom.

Later, when all was over, I thought:
It must have been a whim. God's whim.
So cold, so mean.