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Awake (1969)

M.

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AWAKE (1969)

M

A daughter's face is a peach in the bin
outside Mr. Alessia's grocery next door
and people who should know better
cannot resist plumpness.

Bickering from the other room
strips the finish from the pine cabinets:

*non me ne importa un cavolo!*¹

*figlio di puttana!*² I was born deaf
in one ear. Pound cakes visiting
in the kitchen listen to everything they say
and gossip about how little we spent:

*Not even a new dress. Sfaciade.*³

Kennedy's been dead for five years,
but Uncle Sallie still bitches to Aunt Rose,
*It's a damn shame us dagos lost
the only good Catholic boy
this whole fucking country could afford to love.*

My sister Francesca sprinkles salt
on the satin pillow under Mamma's head,
and Viola takes her ruby ring
as if the promissory it was traded for
was contagious. Together we turn her.
A black shoe falls, one with discernment
in the turn of its heel, and an improvised vamp.
Mamma's size, but not one we recognize.
It's Papa's work, who never learned the difference
between commandments and demands.

Mamma always laid on her side in sleep,
one arm thrown open across the badlands
of sheets, her naked lips a glass

1. *non me ne importa un cavolo!*: I don't give a damn about it!

2. *figlio di puttana!*: son of a bitch!

3. *sfaciade*: bad fronted, bad appearing, a social and moral blooper

of cool water on the table for anyone to drink.

The tap in the bathroom drips:

*Smart girls stand up straight
or their lives turn into question marks.*

That day the front door slammed so hard
the back door cracked open.

She'd gotten good at coaxing
dollar bills to dance out of his wallet.

None of us knew where the money went.

He must have believed

it boogie-woogied like a Christ

across the water all the way to Ferla

and he could too.

*Arguing with lies only gets you
left behind, bambinas.*

Francesca paid her way through secretarial school,
and works at Chase Manhattan Bank.

She carpools the nine miles home
at 6:00 p.m., other people's money
cutting like bamboo shoots under her nails.

Bill Mulryan drives and slides
the rear view mirror down until his view
of Francesca's backseat black hair
obliterates the Borden delivery vans
with nothing better to do but gain on them.

Every Sunday in the summer,
Bill grills burgers on the barbecue
while his wife Catherine purrs on kitten heels
that aerate their limeade lawn.

Bill sucks Lugano olives down to the pits
and watches his daughter Debbie's hair turn dirty
blonde in the water of the backyard pool
until he can't catch his breath.

His buddy Dave Callaghan said boys
with secure tickets in their back pockets
to play with the Fighting Irish

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couldn't afford a WOP—*C'mon, Bill,*
they're just niggers turned inside out.
Still there's that Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge
over on 8th with indoor parking.
Dave came back from Uijeongbu
in two different shipments.
Sang-mi told impressive men
he was an excellent marksman,
a flightless woman he learned to cock
better than his rifle.

Francesca coos for strangers'
babies at the Woolworths on Saturdays,
gives them dollar bills
they stuff inside their mouths.
She eats Underwood deviled ham
straight from the can
and an orange every day for lunch.
Occasionally, she'll add six Saltines.

After the undertaker folds the wake
like an American flag, the dead leave
a mess on the carpet. Francesca washes dishes
in the kitchen after everyone's parties.
Viola sings the wrong words to songs on the radio.
She says you can tell a lot about people
from the brand of dishwashing liquid
they buy—Ivory, Dawn, Joy. I tell her
there is vomit and there is shit.
Francesca says *Find a bucket*
and some strong soap.
There are hands and there are knees.