

JULIE MARIE WADE
FIRST PLACE

Source Amnesia

The day has come, your mother has forgotten.
Your father attempts to remember,
but she erases him also, so the pages of his
knowing are torn clean through, like the
garments of a prophet transfigured.

Your mother resolves this arbitrary hour,
on this ordinary summer day, that you are
worth more to her elapsed than alive—
a figment now, a figure no longer.

Meanwhile, in an airport lavatory,
you scrub your hands.
Meanwhile.
A soft word.
Essential, luxurious
as soap.

Your mother is disgusted. The thought
of you touching a woman disgusts her so
deeply she can think of little else. But now
when she thinks of you, it is like gazing
at the smashed fist of a broken mirror—
its spider webs of glass—unable to admit
reflection.

Two skeletons—faceless, fleshless—
knocking bones beneath translucent sheets.

Your father browses dime stores, delays
his return to the brick bunker-house on the
seaside lane.

If only he could remember:
the special significance of the colored tags,
how much off today, how much tomorrow.

It is not the way she imagines. *You* are not
the way. Still, the mounting alarm
after all these years—reeled back in, cast and
re-cast in the strange distant pantomime of
her disappointment. And when you look
over your shoulder in the bathroom mirror,
there is no one visible, no one who would let
herself be seen.

Meanwhile, your father continues
to mean well—his intentions
useful and robust
as a fist against
a concrete door.

On the small perishable province between
innocence and guilt, you have woven
your nest, stitched up your solitude, begun—
if only *begun*—to lower the louvered blinds
of your heart.

Loathing is easy, obvious,
but the essential luxury—*indifference*:
to begin—if only *begin*—to turn a cold
shoulder to the non-figure whose breath
steams slow flowers up the glass.

Meanwhile. The woman who touches
your freshly washed hands is nothing
like your mother. Thank god for that.
Thank god.

Your father: contusion of aimless love,
Protestant ambition. Praise god for the woman
who sews his pockets shut, seals off the portal
to temptation.

Oh, for the change slipping through,
the linty sourballs—

Oh, for what threatens to pass—

Some arbitrary hour of this ordinary
summer a woman is washing clothes—
washing them and hanging them out to dry.

You may recognize her as your mother, you may not.

In the end, it makes no difference.
She will not recognize you.

Outside in the morning chill, she pins
each garment to the shriveling tree, shrill bird
of wires tilting on its rusted axis.

The pockets of her apron bulge with wooden pegs.
The shoulders of her blouses rise with yeast of cushions.

She is not beautiful—not even a little—but you wish
you could love her
just the same.

Meanwhile.

Your father wanders through parking lots.
Your lover lingers near the refreshment stand.

You have choked back everything
human: terror, honor, tears.
But now maybe you would if you could—
would meet her face to face—casualties

of the fractured light, calluses on time's
ancient weary heels—

Instead, you turn your palms upward
under the low heat, wiggle your ten
good fingers on your two strong hands,
consider the blessing of skin: the skiff of
her breath, the wave of your flesh—
gratitude, lust, compassion.

So you leave a room with a faucet
for another without one, knowing a faucet is
a valuable thing, knowing you take nothing
if not your own life in your hands.

On the small perishable province
between restoration and regret,
a body still bows, still bends:

Be it a sink, or a spigot, or
a wild spring—

you see her clearly: there,
always: that stranger—she, you—
kneeling now, washing her hands.