

## NIGHT SCENES

### 1. The Father

We used to stay up and watch them together, *Lenore*,  
*The Raven*, *The Masque of the Red Death*, *The Cask*  
*of Amontillado*—or was that  
never filmed? Regardless, we watched in the ore-  
toned night Vincent Price's putty face  
lengthening each year, his horrible sideburns silvering  
on film as fast as frost devours rope, grim mug straight  
off one of his own dummies in the wax museum.

O, that tufted, glistening cap of hair  
teased like cream into stiff shapes that rose,  
meringue-ish, higher and higher for every role!  
You sat next to me in your high-backed leather chair  
and blinked as the raven's beak drew blood  
from the pale heroine's paler eyes, two unfurled  
ribbons streaming down her cheeks; little carpets ants could  
ascend to reach the scarlet palace of her skull.

You bought me any book I wanted, remember?  
For years that was a steady diet of shock  
inhaled on the Technicolor lawn with its brown plots  
of garden the size of napkins in which—on mother's  
advice—you planted bamboo that pierced the house,  
shot through the cement basement, wheedled and grew  
its way up creaking stairs. Sick of it at last, you roused  
out the slick green cane for the brand-new pandas at the brand-new zoo.

You tried to temper my childish taste for Lovecraft with Poe  
and C. S. Lewis ("Christian belief! The most horrific  
tale of all," you'd cackled), called me *your angel*—or, more specifically—  
*your girl*; hinted at Hitler, Custer, Pol  
Pot, Waterloo, and told me Price once played the romantic lead

in *Laura*—that’s where he learned evil’s  
self-parody—then, when all this finally failed, late  
nights together watching horror films and listening to the groaning of our  
stairwell.

I think there was a movie or two that involved a wheel  
of torture. I know there were flaming velvet dresses,  
underground cathedrals, tombs filled with the fussy,  
moldering skeletons of cruel dukes and princesses, the ne’er-do-wells  
of B-movie plots. I know there was your skull-shaped toe  
propped on the Turkish samovar. Regardless, something in you  
did not mind this, just as something in me needed to control  
it, desperately: the hacked arms and scorpions, fake blood congealing  
on the hanging stool.

Remember the old radio shows you bought  
that I played up in my white bedroom at night,  
listening to the blood rain thrum along our blighted  
roof, the swinging doors like dart-  
ing fingernails on slate? Nothing could be pretty for me then,  
a feeling that similarly haunted you, obsessed with your own  
dim particulars:  
first gray house crumpling to flame, the town’s mechanized dawn  
gong thrumming in the university tower.

Streets your sitter marched you along slick  
with rain, oyster-colored. Maternal dresses sharp with hair wisps,  
scented with bluing. And of course the crisp  
smell of your father’s hunting jacket in memory, the black  
and red wool check into whose pockets he’d stuffed a match or two,  
the pack of rolling pellets. Each summer he left you to lay claim  
to another Alaskan inlet stuffed with salmon till he drowned: his pale,  
gruesome  
head swaddled in a sack when they pulled him from the bay—

With you I saw *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Dracula*, *Alien*, entranced  
by rosettes of vomit and mud, loopy pink coils of intestine  
ready to burst from a stomach like a stout can  
of wire snakes; translucent ropes of saliva like the sticky, rancid  
drippings from raw eggs. Sequins and wood stakes, ashes  
and candelabras: the campy and horrific, truth and lie mixed together  
with such harmony it seemed only too natural to laugh  
or applaud. A practice we'd made perfect. After all, Liberace  
was our favorite singer.

Only once do I remember being really frightened.  
It was midnight and we were downstairs again, you  
with a glass of chocolate milk, me with a wedge of yellow  
cheese as we watched *When a Stranger Calls* and  
it was that scene, the one where the raccoon-eyed baby-sitter  
gets the call from the police who've traced the call from within the house,  
*get out, you must get out*, and the screen fades black as she trips,  
rushing for the door as he grabs for her blouse—

And then the father's face at the doorway. It's hours later.  
The sitter has come to and the father, the town's drunk, harmless  
chief of police, is holding her in his arms.  
There's such an expression on his face, such disbelief, such belated  
sorrow as he holds the weeping girl and is told  
both his children have been eviscerated.  
Police buzzed solemnly on screen as I glanced at you then, cold  
television light flickering across your glasses, your face.

A description of something I'd read in your library, a poem  
given me after too much Stephen King,  
swam up to me as I glanced from you then back to the screen,  
the lines about the young Roman  
watching his captured emperor be flayed alive. It took hours,  
the poet wrote, and they started with knives

and they unbuckled the skin from his meat, his bones, and scoured it with small stones before they hung it up to dry.

And when they were through, when they were entirely finished, they stuffed him with straw and stitched him up the sides of his calves, his penis, his arms, and stuck pearl shells in his empty eyes and hung him in the middle of town. To instruct on what a man might look like, mothers walked their daughters before him all night. *And that was the longest and the last time,* the young Roman wrote, *I ever saw my emperor.*

The father's face sagged on his neck as the sitter gagged in his lap. The clock bonged and when you rose for water I noticed for the first time the creaking of your back, the faltering, raven-like stoop to your shoulders, until I might have even uttered a cry over the thin skin of your nose, saying, *I understand now, father!* as you stroked my hair, and turned off the movie. But of course I didn't. I sat instead in the dark with you quietly, my hand gripping yours, your hand squeezing back, as we listened to the bamboo stitch up our stairway.