

women in the waiting room

kirun kapur



Black
Lawrence
Press

For all the voices,
all the echoes

&

for Jamie, without whom I couldn't find my own

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On Looking at Myself in the Mirror, Or, Re-Reading Valmiki's Ramayana

Anyone can disappear
across the black water.

Every girl can be taught
her middle name is shame.

When will I burn
the urge for purity—

my bones are a furnace
my face is a game.

Every girl steals away
with a demon at some point—

all her alphabets, ankle bells
all her braids—

She will meet herself in the third person,
she will lie with her fear,

she will dress in her rage.

The world is curdled

with husbands,

blue as the gods, gentle as flame.

Girls Girls Girls

Along the strip in Waikiki, past sailor bars
and clubs, the length of beach where lipstick
sunsets smudged and magazines would shoot
and caption, *Paradise*. Past posh hotels
where M. and I would wait for some nice man
to buy us drinks from the bar. We'd watch
the women walk like they were stars onstage,
dress like they couldn't wait to be undressed,
leaning over into idling cars. Out on the west side
of the island, J. tells me any man she dates
is more likely to hit her than pay for her dinner.
Teenagers holding babies spit at us when we stare:
What you looking at? You got nothing.
I have nothing, sobs L., today, on the phone.
I know it isn't my fault, but when I think of how I let him do it
over and over, even helped him cover it up, I hate myself.
I'm thinking of the man who owned the noodle shop,
the man who'd always sit with me and chat
about Hanoi, warm water in canals,
moms on bikes with babies tied down
front and back, how to tell a ripe papaya.
I saw him on the news a few years back,
for smuggling women in refrigerated trucks.

He owned the bar called *Girls Girls Girls*
a few doors down from where he served me pho,
the one whose sign was made of neon legs
that kicked and kicked until they were a stain of light.
We liked to swim along the south shore
when the tide was right. You had to time your dive
or crack your head against the reef. More than once
a girl washed up. Sometimes they named her
on the news. M. and I drank Kamikazes
on the lanai of the new Sheraton,
the chief of security coming out to check
we were the right sort of girls, regaling us
with stories of the wallets stolen off businessmen
by *ladies* visiting their rooms, a theft
they'd later blame on the hotel maid.
*I hate—L.'s voice, mine. When I think
of how I—how times have I said it?*
How many times have I said nothing at all
or tried to explain why we aren't at home—
the right sort of girl and the wrong, why
we're out under the orange street lights.

Hotline

I have been trained

so when she says,

I watched my father

smash my mother's forehead with a wooden broom handle,

I show no sign of shock.

The poet liked to say, *you shouldn't*
borrow sorrow.

Write real things: dish pans, porch screens,
broom handles. *Give me*
a humble trash bag.

For years this face

I trained my mind to un-see—

cheek eaten away by fish,

girl-body, washed up

in the canal, wrapped—

the brand identified as *Glad*.

No scars, birthmarks, clothes, jewelry,

Steubenville Ghazal

Steubenville High School, Ohio, 2013

It was hard not to notice the style of him.
We were all mesmerized by the smile on him.

Snaps, sexts. He might. I might not.
Friends teased, *Post a pic of your thigh for him.*

There's a strip mall, a steel mill, the long Veterans Bridge.
The white picket grin was the lie of him.

A basement. The music. Coats draped on the couch.
I kept drinking and thinking, *Don't be shy with him.*

He posed for the camera, his hand on my neck.
I lay still underneath the hard guile of him.

I dream I'm clear wind, I dream I'm blank space,
I dream of the girl who's surviving him.

Skank. Slut. Cunt. Whore.

What did you expect? is the cry from them.

Skank. Slut. Cunt. Whore.

These are the facts from the trial of him.

In Delhi, a bus. In Houston, a bridge.

There's New Bedford, Toronto, Dubai for him.

For a girl to be innocent she has to be dead.

The newspapers await a reply from him.

My name is redacted, it no longer applies.

I end every line writing *him, him, him.*

The Annunciation

It will come down to he said, she said.

The color of sunlight and shade, what could be heard from the street,
whether the spider lilies were still blooming.

The great I AM spoken by one
swallowed, in silence, by the other.

Many times a day she will try to think of lying there
his shadow crossed over her, but will conjure nothing.

Other times she will wake with the feel of a tongue, wet in her ear
though she has sat for hours on the shower floor scrubbing her face away.

Behold—a word of witness.

So much went unrecorded between the girl and the Angel.

Did it pour down like honey? Did it sting?

The soul, whatever it is, struggles to articulate.

She can still go to that place, where nothing grows,
where her mind has nothing in it and only breath
ties her to the world with a blue hair ribbon.

The movement of the soul toward articulation is slow.
No official complaint has been recorded.

It is known that she was clutching a book,
that through the whole ordeal she kept one finger in the page.

Behold: a word of holding steady

in the mind, in the eye.

Later, they will ask why didn't she drop it, use it to push him away.

No, it was not the first time she'd been in his garden.
Yes, willingly, she may have claimed to be his.

It felt good to be held, until she felt nothing.

Hotline

She said, *I did have a lot to drink*

She said, *I did say he could come in*

It was fall

I could smell the leaves

I could see the ghost of my breath

He kept saying

he

loved me

It's a relief

such a relief

Sometimes I do it while I pray

*She said, I hope it's ok that I'm
calling*

I need to hear a human voice today

She said,

Do you

think it's a sin

Do you think God won't save me if he knows

I love to cut my skin

Is it ok for me to say that here?

She said, I'm not harming myself

I'm making myself feel free

*I've read that nuns were allowed to
starve*

themselves

It was holy, then