

Sarah Carleton

That Photo

Twenty years ago, your smile took up the whole picture,
broad and wicked below your shaved head,
bold light bleaching your pen-scrawled T-shirt, and the dead
bird an inexplicable prop hanging between two hands.

Your grin, midpoint like the v in “devil,”
pushed from chin to ears,
at gleeful odds with the ragged owl
you stretched open like a grim cut-paper project.

I used to search the thin face for signs of you,
finding one top-center skewed tooth
that held you in place in the hard-edged black and white.

I saw the bird and its frayed-wing shadow as wildlife
that far predated our first bear hug,
but lately time and you have contracted:

You crouch by the road—very nearly my sweetheart—
while upstate rises behind and around like a vast
hammock of land that holds you for me.

Waiting

At the rental-car lobby, the toddler climbs
on her mama like crawling into bed,
sobs and sobs, but her mama says
No. You can't always have the thing you want.
Don't be extra.

The room has no toys, TV, books, colors,
smells, myths or curves.
It demands extra. I knit to fill the space,
looping blue yarn over thin metal needles,
building arcs of lace.

The van finally fetches us, driven by
a bright-eyed guy in khakis.
I stow my knitting. The mama dozes.
Little one from her car seat watches
neighborhoods roll by.

I stock the silence with speculation. The driver
is from Tallahassee. He answers questions
but never poses them. The tattoo on his forearm
says *You only live once* in fancy script.
My arms are blank pages.

Acoustic Neuroma in the Family

She who can tuck
her foot behind her neck,
walk on her hands,
carve thirty pumpkins in one sitting,
grow happy sons and pick
plump peas in summer
has gone to California.

She gave us signs—
a hand braced on the counter,
stacks of unread library books,
a sudden absence of sarcasm,
ramped-up volume, naps.

Now she shuffles around a hospital
with a gauze-banded bump on her head,
while back home apples pucker
and water sours.
Children whine in tongues.
Walls expand, corners go missing.
Silence wraps me
like an oversized turban

and sound waves dissolve at my feet.
I close my eyes against a stumble
and imagine her standing
in a berry-stained dress,
brown hair smooth behind her ear,
and my heart so open
it spills light onto her
as I fall.

The Squatters

First a lone scout zigzagged across the countertop. I wiped its trail with a soapy rag and checked for jam smears. All clear. Next week came peppery lines trekking over the soapstone. Damp towel in hand, I erased the queues that stretched from doorjamb to clock radio, but soon they regrouped, drawn to the electric sizzle of that humming block.

The numbers flipped on the minute and hour, the newscasters spoke in static. When I tilted it back, black beads fell out, writhed and scattered, before disappearing in my swift swipe. I pulled the plug, leaving the box unheated. They must have loved the dark mess of wires in their warehouse, because even without utilities they stayed. One day, I turned the radio in my hands, inspecting vents and screw holes, and felt gooseflesh horror as clumps of ants shook loose and landed on the counter.

I ran outside, holding the gadget by its cord, ants tickling my forearms. Crouching behind the woodpile, I whacked the plastic sides over and over. Each time, mounds—no, acres, nations—of ants plummeted to the yellow grass.

They never did peter out, so finally I fled, unbinding myself from time and frequencies, the cheap construction tossed sideways in the mud.

Sarah Carleton writes, edits, plays music and home-schools her son in Tampa, Florida. Her poems have appeared in *Houseboat*, *Burning Word Literary Journal*, *Avatar Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *The Bijou Poetry Review*, *Off the Coast*, *Shark Reef*, *Wild Violet Magazine*, *The Binnacle* and *Cider Press Review*. She has work upcoming in *Nimrod*.