

Sitting for the Photo

Elizabeth Reed

My mom suggested maybe I should have the neighbor take a photograph of me right before I exited prepubescence, so I would be topless and 12 in the photo. She wanted a freeze-frame of that time—thought I might appreciate it later. She has since remarked on how my eighteen-years-younger sister has no wrinkles on her elbows, and on the newness and perfection of a peach rose blooming in her garden. Newness equals perfection. Looking at an old photo of herself in Mexico, her face in profile, the cars dating the image, the smoothness of her skin and shadows, a milk cheek carved into a chin like a Georgia O’Keeffe landscape, she tells me how beautiful she was, and how she threw it all away by marrying my father. Such absurd things she relays and not once has heaven interceded to comment on how I did not want to hear or know.

If the photographer had come that day it would have been in the living room where I sat for the photo. My mom would have seen to it that my hair was blown dry, auburn appearing still water gray in the photo. Taking off a button-down shirt, that would have been painful. Did I wear bras then? Half the time? I wouldn’t have worn one that day in anticipation of the undressing. I would have been in blue jeans, the waistband a ridge of denim that tapped against my belly as I breathed in and out, the metal button folded into skin at a shiny angle. Maybe my twelve-year-old feet, a mix of new to the world and calloused from years of ballet, would have been sweating against the ridges of Sisal carpet. The new round-smelling sweat would be itching its way out of my underarms. That snapshot would finally confirm that any beauty I had belonged to her, was seen and possessed in a different way than I knew it in myself. My beauty, to me, was about courage, standing up for others, inquisitiveness, my father’s features; and while I never didn’t want her love, I never did want her same ideas of beauty. Maybe she would have set out some rice crispy treats to munch between frames—treats in a pyramid on a gold-etched plate on the side table covered with the generous drapes and the chiseled modern lamp, sea glass green, beside the gold velvet sofa. Even the furniture got to wear more clothes than I did. While the shutter blinked, perhaps I would have looked out past the draped curtains through the glass doors onto the patio with the creeping wisteria and two-story iron fence, as a peacock landed there and then swatted

about to get out, wings clapping body, sunset tearing through feathers, blushes of pink trumpet flowers bruised and crinkled and folded in the wake of the peacock's attempt to escape, to swim up through the green vines, the struggling bird's feet touching down and up against the pebbles in the cement, a moment of rest preening while standing on the cylindrical hood of the ink-black, iron bar-b-que pit, trailing feathers like a Klimt painting rustling. Even the leaves would have aligned themselves to make the peacock feel heard—shaping waxy green patterns to shield the peacock from possession. Lizards would have come out from behind the ivy to behold this wonder, and I would have watched it stoically not letting on while the operation to preserve my youth for my mother continued.

Afterward would be the usual dinner—homemade Caesar salad, pasta with peas and ham, followed by homework. A few weeks later an image would come to haunt the walls: a thin shadow between arm and torso, a coldness in goose bumps across the skin, a frankness of gaze, breast buds, me at twelve. Everything I loved about myself would have been hidden for safekeeping, hidden from the violation of the camera, that year before my mom left to go back home to another state, to leave me with my dad and school—for my sake, to freeze a frame of my life that still goes everywhere with me frozen. It seemed as if she knew she could preserve me in that stage relative to her, an adoring child on the brink of separating and womanhood, her idea of perfect, one way or another. And I am left with the bird inside still trying to shed its camouflage and declare an unruly beauty, to molt and feather and molt and feather in a new incarnation for all the days of the year and all the seasons of the earth in accordance with how the stars once put the ever-combustible ingredients united upon conception.

Elizabeth Reed recently relocated to her native Houston after almost a decade in New York. When not working on her own stories, she enjoys lending support to others'—as a social worker. Her writing has appeared in *Elle* magazine and *The Brooklyn Rail*.