

REBECCA LILLY

John Albert

1.

John Albert was hardly a dream,
but he might've stepped out of one.
Tall, skinny, with a T-shirt and dirty jeans,
his cheeks livid with scars and pockmarked,
his brown hair disheveled and curly—
late thirties I'd guess.

With the help of Mrs. Richardson, my clerk,
(for years, she'd done remarkable business)
we uncovered *not our specialty*, the sun fetish,
but a rather more menacing vestment.

2.

At the cash register,
we had to be curious, however,
if not suspicious. (He was used
to this, I think. He needed it.)
He had his mask in hand.
"Perhaps a sun fetish,
instead, Mr. Albert?"
That didn't strike his fancy.

"A sun fetish? *That* wouldn't happen."
He had an enigmatic laugh.
His long fingers held a giant funeral mask,
our finest specimen in black.

After he left, Mrs. Richardson admitted,
"My heart went out to him."
A shy vulnerable man.
"What a life his must've been."

I had a different opinion.
“More good than harm,” I offered.
“It’s a glow-in-the-dark,
is it not? A sun fetish for a heart
sworn to darkness!”

“Or for dead poets,”
Mrs. Richardson casually remarked.
“They wear their funeral masks *for show*.”

3.
Really, the sale depressed us *wholly*.
And John Albert kept re-surfacing
in fantasies, at least for me—
a jester, a supernatural fiend!
Or was he just a loser, perhaps,
and as sweet as Mrs. Richardson believed?

Since then, we’ve discontinued . . .
or . . .at least omitted funeral masks
from inventory. (The money’s nothing,
and it pains us to see him.)

Now and then, he visits us,
but she and I successfully divert him.

“Look at this, Mr. Albert,
this pyramid with golden tassels,
our newest sphinx’s statue. Fetishes
for travel—”

“No, ma’am.” (He addresses Mrs. Richardson—
am I invisible?) “Ma’am, I’m past the magic.
A mask is not a pair of glasses.”

What exactly did he mean by that?
That we were buffaloed? That every fake is bad?

Mrs. Richardson blanched.
“We’re so sorry, John,
so terribly sorry, to have sold you our last.”

“Don’t pass too many graves, Mr. Albert,” I added,
“the sun there always shines the same.”
I had to say it, though I doubt it dissuaded him.

“I’m afraid I’ll be a wanderer of graveyards
all of my days. It’s my testament of fallen faith.”

I glanced, ashamed, at Mrs. Richardson,
who nodded and simply said,
“John, may your life sustain you.”

Cut the melodrama!
But I’d promised my reception
would be courteous. However the act
plays out, in the end, I’m very shrewd
at choosing fetishes, and my depth perception
is infallible.

“We’ll be waiting for you, Mr. Albert.
Do come again.”