

PETER COOLEY

Some Call It Childhood

I. Twice Alive: Detroit; the secret; the Winter Solstice

Not yet the blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz
Dickinson's death fly inscribes for us,
just now my sister, between hefts of breath,
dozes, a bevy of black women attending her.
When she awakes, she will encircle each one with her curses.
Staring at her, a Jack O'Lantern grin
her only feature, sucking in oxygen,
I realize only I remember her hands about my throat
as she lowered my little head into the toilet
fifty years back and, breathless I came up
after my suicide attempts and therapists
to stand here this morning, twice alive by killing him,
the boy brought up to hate himself.

How sweet it is
to look upon her, feeling nothing but a little rush
that she get on with it, so we can share awhile
the windows failing—oh the wonder!—of her dying.

II: Leave-taking; Detroit; questions; A Midsummer Night's Dream

Not yet the ecstasy, the iconic thrill
release should give her body, perishing.
Watching my sister sleep, I see her still
enmired in the tedium of her dying.
Fifty years back her hands, aflutter now—
but reader, you know what they did!—
and I emerged to stand here now beside my dad,
ninety-two yesterday, celebrating with a grin
missing today, looking down upon her, silent, always.

In an album of another time (some call it childhood)
my sister threw away but I remember,
my sister rides my father's back, her grin ecstatic.
I remember, too, the game of "horse,"
release from my mother at the end of dinners
bound by her preoccupation with the perfect dish.
I gluttonized to satiate her question: was I happy?
Once, there must have been something like . . . tenderness
between my father and sister such as I have known
three times a father. Staring at her here, my dad
remembers what? Anticipates? Appreciates
the irony of ecstasy, my sister, black lungs shot,
will predecease him, her trust fund returned to him?

In that photograph, the ground, pock-marked with autumn leaves,
darkens with years my father raked after we left.
I pray, come Fall, he and I together

will drive out to watch the leaves turn, scattering
multifoliate, riotous and hectic,
through the chill Michigan October. I know
he will not speak today or that day about my sister.
Will I ever tell my father? Is it too late to expose her?

My sister will not survive another Winter.