

Running · *Leslie Ullman*

I

Lately my neighbor wheezes
pounding dough, her forearms
glazed with sweat and flour.

“At your age,” my mother
writes, “I wanted babies.

I got pregnant
each time one of you
learned to walk.”

I circle the block again
and again, until I run
outside my body.

This time last year
my husband stopped
speaking of the other woman
who slept poorly inside him.

She promised in another town
to give him up. All night she
tossed and tried to speak
until he spoke of his
father, who drank himself
into the cracked
well of his voice
and never touched bottom.
She made him wake sweating
and brooding in the close
room of his departure
while I ran past my neighbor’s
lawn and plump loaves settling
in their heat
to an early shape of myself.

II

I've forgotten whose apartment
 stretched like a tunnel,
 shapeless and dark
 the way my good dress hung
 too large, a formal
 body outside my body.
 The other men drifted
 alike behind their drinks
 while he stood in one place
 and spoke to me of *The Moviegoer*
 which spoke, he said, to his very soul.

*Sometimes I run in Louisiana,
 where I've never been,
 where the hero saw an egret gather
 itself over swamp mist
 and settle in a single oak
 that rose to meet it.
 Later he married his cousin
 whose agile mind wandered,
 glittering at the family table.
 The dense mahogany.
 The black butler
 wheezed as he passed buttered beans.
 She couldn't sleep, she
 said, without pills.
 Sometimes she slept for two days.
 She promised she could
 be like anyone, if he
 would tell her each morning
 how to pass that day.*

That night, my skin
held me like liquid glass.
I wanted to slip
my hand beneath his elbow,
to dance,
to see the other women naked
inside their clothes.

III

Every morning I run
through pollen, late-summer
haze, or rain. My husband
is an illness I had
in another country.

*The day he left
again and again he said
it wasn't my fault.
I circle the block, pump
and sweat until I run
outside my body.
My ribs ached.
He ran his hands
gently over them.*

Inside my running
I write to him, breaking
the silence we keep
for his new wife:
*I saw the sun disappear
into mist as it reached
the horizon. I saw an egret
airborne, circling all
this time.*

The morning bus gathers
husbands and children
and leaves for a moment
a soft rope of exhaust.
I draw breath over breath
as the children

must breathe in their sleep.
My neighbor waves
from her doorway, watches
my easy stride. "Your waist,"
she says wistfully,
"fits the dress I wore as a bride."