SUSANNA MISHLER

Free Radicals

When Dorothy tells me that's the title of her next installation
I lose track of what she's saying and notice tiny people
playing on the rim of my soup bowl. I lean in to look.
They're wearing beads and handkerchiefs;
some aren't wearing anything else. Dorothy's a sculptor who
bends tailpipes into human postures and is earnestly explaining how
car parts testify to the endurance of art and nature when
the blind waiter taps over with his cane, points
to the tiny people and says, "When you're finished,
the arrangement of their bodies tells your fortune." He walks
a bowlegged, old man walk to the next table.
I knock some people in and shake pepper on them.
They hold their hands out like it's raining, shout and swagger
on saltines like pirates. One clings to the spoon's lip and hoots
as I lift it. He tastes like patchouli. The waiter turns on his heel and listens
like a cat: that crouching, frozen posture that suggests detection of something
imaginary. The kind of listening that precedes
frenzied pouncing on shoelaces and paper scraps.
I swallow my fortune and smile in a way I hope is reassuring, then
remember he can't see me and say, "Mmm," instead.
We pay our bill and step into autumn wind,
head toward the park to watch kites. I think of my sister-in-law's
acupuncturist, who is also blind. He's a master, she claims,
so deft he won't poke you with needles but hold them
so they barely touch your skin. I remember thinking
how beautiful that was, his precise touch like a blind archer
whose arrows seek and hover short of the deer's ribs. How the deer
springs through undergrowth, tail up, and lives to enter another meadow
with other deer, who raise their heads from grazing to stare.
"My hide just stopped an arrow," she says, flicking one ear. "I must
be invincible." The others blink and dip their heads for another mouthful.
"Did you hear me?" She steps toward them, snorting a little.
The closest one eyes her, chewing slowly.
"That's *invisible*, Tillie. I think you mean,
invisible," she says.