

The First Famous Lady He Ever Kissed ·
Charles Casey Martin

for John Berryman

. . .

The sad cardboard cylinder sits
empty on its spindle by the stool;
she's out of everyday aspirin, too,
& on the sink-side
in the shallow porcelain grave for soap
birth control toothpaste rests instead

escaping its capless tube. Her diaphragm also
like the half an eye no one wants to see
looks up from where it should not:
beside instead of inside
its pink clam carry-case.
He's seen enough Dutch art to know that if

over-ripe pears, wilting carnations & perishable clams
can stand, in a picture, for lost time
then this still-life of missing towels
toilet paper, medicine & make-up
has to have its meaning too:
she is out of the ordinary

. . .

& that's why he begins to love her.
So far he's not known: anonymous especially
to himself being that age when a kid begins to think
of ending his learning & facing that blankest
of all solid, possible walls: freedom.
She's his teacher at the university

famous for poetry
& this is her livingroom: books lie
half-read or fully abandoned
open on the floor by the sofa.
Those piled boxes hold her share of a household
she & her husband recently divided.

“Four,” she says & he thinks: “Too many.”
Enough for a roommate other
than her triplet housecats. But maybe
like a fatlady with a thin new dress
she meant to rent an extra room
hoping to alter her condition & fill it.

. . .

For weeks she’s been without
lightbulbs. “Easy to forget
in the daytime,” she says. “Sorry . . .”
as the darkness they’re sitting in
increases. The pullstrings in her closets,
the one on her sunporch:

they try them all but none will ignite
the gray bulbs overhead
which the famous lady compares out loud
to bruised & used-up pears.
Then she remembers the kitchen: the foodlight
preserved by the shut icebox door.

It’s cold when they touch it
yet they’ll depend on this one bulb
for the rest of their lives
& take it with them
to every next room
just as they do tonight.

. . .

Without its help she seems to know by heart
the difficult alleys around & between
the large details that jam her rooms.
Whether she stands on the kitchen splashboard
the secretary or the toilet seat
each time she reaches to plug the bulb in

a shower of light makes her famous again.
But now they've talked
so many hours in her kitchen
that the light's too hot to unscrew:
she has to use a potholder.
While she carries the sleeping bulb

to the one room he hasn't seen
the only brightnesses she leaves behind
are the six red eyes of her cats
& the thin hands of a clock
fluorescent like the phrase of moonlight
that breaks between the windowsill & shade.

. . .

She'll let him kiss her if he really wants to
but first she feels she has to tell him
how different fame is—not the same
as asking for money or love:
her punishment for wanting in the first place
something impossible to give

is to have it now & to wonder
how she can give it back.
Finally she is able to say this
but in a simpler way
which is why she is famous
& not him:

The trouble with a lightbulb is
you can never really see one at night
during the black hours it was meant to be useful through.
Lit, it's so bright you can't look;
not, it's invisible too,
in the darkness it creates.