

Fictional Mothers #3

My mother is becoming a fiction,
receding behind me in funnels of film star
cigarette smoke like a cheap screen.
(There was always something between us.)
She had ambitions in Technicolor, surround
sound, fast forward, freeze, jump cut, montage.
She built herself like a visual jazz.

It wasn't magic. Spells. Alchemy.
She drew borders like she painted
her mouth, contoured lines, lips laminated.
She was a compendium of cosmetic tricks,
generic glamorous lies and waxy thick
cherry-red lipstick, fake British accent
and absurd tragedies I believed.

I absorbed each shabby counterfeit syllable.
She was half-Cherokee and orphaned.
She watched a brother burn to death
in a back country shed in an autumn
of milk weed and golden rod yellow
as an inland sea.
(All interiors are fluid.)
She was mistress to a Spanish count
with a villa in Malta.
She graduated Summa cum Laude in two years
and spent summers in North Africa sleeping
in caves, subsisting on berries and fish,
shoplifting cameras from tourists.

Of course, she was beautiful.
Rules are irrelevant for women with eyes
like crushed iris. She smokes and calibrates
her mascara in the mirror. We converse
through glass, her face bulb-lit and magnified.
I'm permanently peripheral, behind, on the margin,
in shadow, in postures of submission.
She is naked, trailing a red mantilla
like a stripper's boa.
In cantinas she barter her body for wine
and sport. Stars embroider her skin.

Now she is leaving, fading, finding trains
to hometowns that don't remember her

or her made-up cinema names. The new
math hasn't reached the provinces yet where
Anna became Angelica and Mildred=Madeline.
Bernice to Brittany. Golda to Gwendolyn.
It's not a complicated sleight of hand.
No physics or critical theory.
But those farmers can't even add.

My mother is departing with her bark skin
translucent paper-thin outer shells.
She's an insomniac in a pauper's grave.
That's a lie. We don't bury our dead.
We burn them and toss the ashes.
Cemeteries are reserved for presidents
and movie stars. The rest get six feet
of dirt off a highway in a county we
didn't know exists and won't visit again.
The confused directions to the remote hole.

No wreaths or annual memorials, either.
No brass bands or neighbors bereaved in black.
In my nation, death is not in fashion.

We are an astonishment of disappointment,
mute by circumstances we didn't transcend,
not with psychiatrists, doctorates and volunteer service.
Not with hemispheres, the globe
consumed in increments of passport stamps.
So many points of entry, so much ink
and we are gutted past empty.
Further discussion is impolite.
Inscriptions in granite are still permitted----

*Here lies a woman who bent the truth
until her daughter broke*