

“Home Training” by Bruce A. Jacobs

I remember how they clung
to the white door of the Frigidaire:
lessons that swung in and out
with every trip for baloney
or green Jell-O.

“Intelligence is like a river:
the deeper it is,
the less noise it makes.”
“Do unto others as you
would have them do unto you.”

To an eight-year-old, they seemed
to spread from the kitchen
like flat snails that traveled
by night, affixed themselves
at eye level, surprising us
as we climbed stairs
and turned corners.

Even the laundry chute
bore a message: “Perseverance
is the secret to success.”
It was as if my mother were afraid
that walls without explanations
would give us the wrong idea
about playing outside.

While she slept afternoons
in her night nurse’s uniform,
Rudyard Kipling held forth
on the door of my bedroom
about boys becoming men,
and a pair of slender praying hands
held out reminders about serenity,
things one can and cannot change.

I had not yet read about
white men with guns in India
or declared boycott on church.
But I felt I was old enough
to drop my dirty underwear
down a hole without instruction.

I did not know then
about the power of signs,
how two words posted
on every Jim Crow rest room
from Ohio to Arkansas
on my childhood vacations
had meant squatting in fields,
or holding pride between one’s legs
like an eighteen-hour vise.

My grandfather held it
straight through from Toledo
to the Voting Rights Act.
One day he pulled up
in our driveway in Rochester
unable to say hello,
then drove his pastel '58 Chevy
straight to the hospital,
where they unlocked his bladder
with a catheter.

I did not know then about
the dog-eared petition
that white neighbors signed
against our moving in,
or how the hammered circles
of my father's bare feet on the floor
had something to do with
his walking hat in hand
to every bank in the city,
finally needing a white patron
to co-sign a loan
for a pharmacy that hung
his own name in red letters.

I did not know how
the chase for polite proverbs,
the embrace of cliché,
the laying on of hands to placards
printed in white men's language
was my mother's set of instructions
for nuclear weapons,
her own code of war
for ramming the atoms
of forbidden existence,
her way of clearing a circle
for the perfectly ordinary,
where brown children could dream
free of police dogs,
where her son could kiss a white girl
and not pay at the neck,
where "please" and "thank you"
were tickets held at gunpoint
and her fence line of red roses
gave the world deadly warning.

Now my sister's small daughter
runs free as dirt in the yard
before being given a bath. I watch her,
a brown girl in a white basin
with promise foaming at her shoulders,
while above her hang sayings
taped to tile by my sister,
an enduring ritual
of words cleansing walls.