

## On the Subway by Sharon Olds

The boy and I face each other.  
His feet are huge, in black sneakers  
laced with white in a complex pattern like a  
a set of intentional scars. We are stuck on  
opposite sides of the car, a couple of  
molecules stuck in a rod of light  
rapidly moving through darkness. He has the  
casual cold look of a mugger,  
alert under hooded lids. He is wearing  
red, like the inside of the body  
exposed. I am wearing dark fur, the  
whole skin of an animal taken and  
used. I look at his raw face,  
he looks at my fur coat, and I didn't  
know if I am in his power-  
he could take my coat so easily, my  
briefcase, my life-  
of if he is in my power, the way I am  
living off his life, eating the steak  
he does not eat, as if I am taking  
the food from his mouth. And he is black  
and I am white, and without meaning or  
trying to I must profit from his darkness,  
the way he absorbs the murderous beams of the  
nation's heart, as black cotton  
absorbs the heat of the sun and holds it. There is  
no way to know how easy this  
white skin makes my life, this  
life he could take so easily and  
break across his knee like a stick the way  
his own back is being broken, the  
rob of his soul that at birth was dark and  
fluid and rich as the heart of a seedling  
ready to thrust up into any available light.

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