

David Weiss

Medicine Chest

We'd come to run new hot and cold water pipe
and change a sink too old to repair, the type,
massive and venerable on its iron-porcelain
pedestal that was meant to last a lifetime.

We would junk those for scrap and eventual recasting.
They let us in, mother and fifty-year-old daughter and hovered
like dust motes in the vestibule as we lugged in our tools,
the one tiny and suspicious, the other huge and misshapen,
both musty and desiccated in their frowsy floral housecoats.

Each thing we moved to make room to work —
the bathmat, the scale, scouring pads — upset them terribly
as if we had just broken into the burial chamber of a pyramid;
dust and grime clung to the tiles and to the mirror
on the medicine chest; the tub thickened with mold.

Yet the room was tidy, attended to. In the kitchen all aflutter
they listened to our hammering and Bill's grunts as he lay
on his back uncoupling corroded 1/2" connectors from the basin.

I could hear the mother hiss, *ask if they'd like some tea,*
and the daughter whisper, *maybe we shouldn't disturb them.*

Ask them! Mother! excited to have men in the house.

The brother never came by, they complained, and the A & P
delivered only to the door. Each time he had a question —
do you have a broom handy, ma'am, or which way
do you want these handles to face — Bill would put
his perspiring, muscular self right against the daughter.

Up close, you could see the bald patches on the back
of her head and smell the sour flesh, he told me.

He got a kick out of flustering her that way.

When we got done, Bill washed off the mirror
and brought her in to see the finished work.

He was smiling that cocky Irish smile of his
as she looked up from the unpitted whiteness of
her new vanity and saw their cheeks, in the mirror, touching.
Later on, I was sent there on a call-back,

the handles on the faucet needed adjusting.
 Already then the mother had taken to bed for good.
 I could hear her calling weakly from upstairs.
 The daughter paid her no mind; instead, standing
 uncomfortably close to me, she whined that sponges
 were missing, the sink was crooked, the water too hot.
 Then the kettle began whistling and she scuttled off.
 I caught myself staring at the still-clean mirror.
 Barely twenty, I'd been alone a long time
 waiting for someone who could face without flinching
 my gashed and aching soul, who would see me
 for what as yet I hadn't become. But still it was a shocker.
 There, gazing back nakedly, crying for contact, frightened
 homely, an open, unwritten book, was the daughter's face.
 I yanked open the medicine chest to escape.
 Inside were three sets of teeth, gums pink and shiny,
 a tweezers, a rusty razor, and bottles: Maalox,
 Colyrium, petroleum jelly. On the lower shelf,
 a folded Chinese fan, Chanel #5, tester-sized, empty
 on its side, faintly fragrant. Behind it, facets
 trapping, and turning, and giving back light
 from a crypt of lint and loose hair, was a ring,
 a diamond, unobscured by neglect, tiny as the mole
 beneath the daughter's left ear. I heard her
 slowly mounting the stairs, *I'm coming, Ma,*
that nice young man is here. Its gleam
 took me in and turned me, found me wanting
 and threw me back brightly, altered, suggesting
 another sort of life, one which might give off
 the smothering, damaged givens as something other
 than dross, as something lighter and lovelier
 than what I took as my beginnings. All I thought
 then was: who could love the like of her, or me?
 I shut the door and fled quickly, taking something
 of the ring — it's right here — with me.