

Allison Joseph

Genealogy

I

Dim dance hall light.
Fragile pleats end
just above my mother's

thin, brown ankles,
red carnations bloom
at her waist.

Leaning against a wall,
hands behind her,
she's restless, rustling

in blue, shirred silk.
In this damp room,
she's cold — miserly

central heating hardly
rising beneath her dress.
Outside, the British chill

bows asters to earth,
spiked stars, bent stalks.
Head down, she sways

as couples shuffle past,
moving to the insistent music,
keeping time with her body.

Precarious on points

of high heels, lovely
and awkward, she'll lean until

that man with the single scar
sidles up, sharp pleats
on baggy trousers,

spit-shined shoes. They'll
take turns at shyness,
flushed with this night,

until she takes his hand,
moving, beginning
the dance, rhythms of cha-cha

and merengue driving
them forward,
into the music's reckless

percussion, its promise,
its pulse spinning
my parents, not letting go.

II A Photo

They stand together, touching
along lengths of arms,
and I can't tell if they hold
hands, or merely let bodies
touch. Her arms are long,
too long for the sweater
she wears; it hunches under
her armpits, leaves wrists
and forearms bare. Stooping,
head and shoulders hunched,
she's not taller than my father,
who buttons only one button
on his jacket, deliberately

casual, a small smile lifting
his cheeks into roundness.

She's in pleats from waist
to calves, smiling face lit.

50's black and white,
their faces almost colorless,
brown faded gray. They lean
on a fence in a country

I've never seen, newlyweds
on holiday, brazen in travel,
in pleasure, their foreheads
smooth, unwrinkled, eyes narrow
in glaring sun.

III

For an instant, in the mirror,
I swear I saw it — my mother's body

instead of my own — pocked flesh,
puckered navel, stretched skin

of knees and elbows, aged chips
of toenails. Squatting naked

in our blue bathtub, she slung
a ragged, soapy washcloth

onto thighs, hips, chest,
hoarding the water as if

still a Jamaican schoolgirl,
the tub only half-full.

When she turned her back to me,
I knew to lean down over her,

to cup my hands in the water,
pouring it over back and shoulders,

rinsing where she could not reach.
Her back would glisten with it,

scars gleam as if they never hurt.

IV

Clutter of change and pencil stubs,
keys for locks that no longer work,
one burnt out television set.

I find myself among the unwieldy
stuff of my father's life —

lottery tickets, parking fines,
smooth white mounds of bills.
This room is full of things

love can't repair, remnants
of homes in other countries,

this house the last in our
chain of immigrant stops —
London, Toronto, New York,

last home for any of this.
My mother's sewing machine

sits untouched in the corner.
I tried once to set it whirring,
but my fingers caught between

needle and presser foot, cloth
snagged, seams crooked

as my father's sly bets.

V

Today a restive urge to clean
 has me on my knees,
picking lint off carpet,
 fingers like my mother's —
long, fine. I clean the table,
 long wipes of a rag,
remember her swift hands
 on its surface.
In the linen closet, clothes
 were stuffed low,
no longer smelling
 of her, and I knew again
the hoax of the body,
 the regeneration
that did not come —
 my father and I
in a hospice room
 high above the city,
cleaner than the streets,
 the stubby grasses below.
Her body seemed all bone,
 skin stretched to cover,
thinned past adolescence,
 childhood, chemo scars
ridged into her arms.
In that cool room,
I surrendered, knew only
 the few words she
has left. Now I kneel
 in our house, body
rocking with stories,
 all I've inherited
staring back at me,
 waiting for my touch.