

Uncle Chester's Second Wife

I'm eighteen, traveling east, my first summer
away from home. I've stopped for a few days

in Baltimore, my uncle's house — cat smell
of the boxwood hedge, cicadas tuning their engines

all afternoon in the hemlock tree. No one approves
of Cathy, the new wife. She's thirty, smokes

Virginia Slims, gives me a sweating gin
and tonic, a bosomy hug hello. They're nothing

like my parents. They listen to Hendrix.
Chet wears a pendant, slicks back his hair.

After we eat, he rolls a fat joint. *Jamaican*,
he says, and we smoke it. I go to bed stoned.

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Stack of Playboys in the guest room, *Justine*,
The Story of O. It's hot — I'm eighteen,

what else would I do? Find the Girls
of the Big Ten, kick back the sheet.

I'm almost done when Cathy walks in.
She squeaks, I cover myself with a pillow,

she drops her armload of towels, scuttles out,
slams the door. And stands awhile in the hallway.

Taps a cigarette out of the pack. It's humid —
at first the match won't light, but then it spits

and flares. Cathy exhales. The glass doorknob turns. *Listen*, she says, stepping back in,

one side of her lipstick too wide for her mouth.
You don't have to stop. I mean, it's fine with me.

She leans against the closed door, one hand
on the dresser, blue smoke uncoiling.

I'm still stiff as a tusk. She doesn't budge,
doesn't touch me. I do it myself, cicadas revving

and stalling — not even the ghost of a breeze.
When I'm through, she hands me a towel.

Kisses me once, her tongue in my mouth.
And then she says *Sorry, God, I'm so sorry.*

Next morning, early, I hurl myself into my Plymouth,
rumble away — Chet and Cathy afloat on their waterbed,

hangovers brewing. Years later, here's the part
I go back to, the part I still don't get: how to live

in these bodies — follicles, skin mites, fungus and gas.
Literal creatures. What sweet destruction they hold.