

apt

issue seven

MASTHEAD

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DEFENSES

Krysten Hill

I.

They follow me out the bar.
Want an apology for the untouched drink
they sent over. It's funny that I won't
turn around or slow down, that my flight
gives me away. That they can put my name
and shape it any way in their mouths.
They catch it with the phlegm in their throats
and spit it on the sidewalk.

Because every man is the one
who took me into a room and wouldn't let me out,
I carry a pocket knife. Palm it on my way home.
Even for the man I love,
there is a knife inside my nightstand.

Because *a bitch can't say thank you*,
a rock catches up to my heel
and I am down on the ground.
They laugh at the noise I make when I fall,
the animal that comes out of a wilderness in me.

They back away with their hands up
because it's a joke after all, and to prove it,

HILL

one tries to help me off the ground. I reach out
and slit another laughing mouth
into his hand.

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II.

In the writing workshop, he asks:

*Is there any way
you can write this poem
from his perspective?*

III.

My mama never taught me to fight
not because she didn't know
how to turn her own black body
into a baseball bat hiding
behind a bedroom door,
but because she thought that everything
would be different for me.
Could spare me the lesson
of what it was to prepare my body
for a war I was already standing in.

IV.

I dream of the way he calls you back
into that house with its perpetual roses
climbing the fence. At night, you tug at the bottom
of my sheets. Fasten yourself to my chest.
Girl, I'm gonna learn how to rock you to sleep
and forgive all those nights you kept me up,
because they ain't gonna tell us
what we remember any more.

We still trying to figure how
this man gonna follow us,
gonna open us up, separate all
that scar tissue we've been barely
keeping together with time,
and this man gonna come with all his weight,
lips turned back on the biggest smile we ever seen.
Behind my lids, we go back to that closet
behind the musk of Mama's dresses
and touch ourselves trying to see
why it feels so good to him.

He tried to put his hand over all the words
we've ever learned, but we gonna remove
his instrument of forced entry.
Gonna learn how to speak because silence
is father to son to mama to brother to
sister to cousin to friend to rape and
they ain't gonna tell us what we remember any more.

V.

I become a horn to be heard over whistles.

I bear my 14-year-old body under X-rays of neighbor
boys that want to press flesh into something they can use.

They inherit their older brothers' catcalls. Learn to shout
me into their idea of woman. Waiting for the school bus,

they are pulling up my skirt and I am learning how to ball a fist.

Anger is a weapon I take from my cheek when pushed to the wall
of another boy's pelvis. Feeling what my fear is making rise on him,

I make fists in my throat. My voice a short step, a turn of shoulders,
my extended arm, my entire body in resistance.

VI.

My grandmother told me this story once
about the man who told her they were going for a walk.

Her mama said she was the ugliest thing in town.
Dark like a work shoe. Now sweet-thinged by his honeyed wink.

She held his hand like it was the best dream
about leaving she ever had. He took her away

from the road because he said there was an old tree
they could climb to see all the way to the edge of town.

Her heart grew eyes, priming itself for a view, but he took her
where the trees grew shorter and thick

like a bundle of wrists held together, where the cicadas
screamed louder than she did. The girl that smiled at him stayed

to look for the tree. The girl who walked back
burned her dress in the trash pile, had a son the next spring.

She was married her off to a sympathetic man who drove her
in the field with his mouth's fastened strap. Bragged

she was the best mare he ever had. When she outlived him,
watched his meanness rot him bedridden and buried,

I asked about the best time of her life. She said,
I guess it would be right now, sitting on her porch

with a rifle mounted on the wall
for the coyotes howling for her chickens at night.