

After the Hour

after René Stout's "Red Room at Five"

:00

You have me thinking about thirst
[how strange to feel it
settle on the brain like ash]
when I should be making swift
work with my hands. Palm-magic I brew,
deep-tissue down the leather-delicate
skin of legs sluggish with years.

Lack is everywhere suddenly, I can see it
each day collecting in the thick pulp of the veins
I knead, the muscles a seizing wasteland.

And when all the bodies are gone from here
[none of them,
not one of them yours, none of them]
it colors even the window's silent offer
and the sun's whisper: *here, here still.*

:10

*A tonic for the tongue,
a bitter wash of mollusk crushed
to coat, to melt a name into*

*well-water and sweet dusk; to still a twist
of spine, its edges sharpened until skin breaks
and starts in on the shadows; to change our shape,*

*glass blown to beast; to brawl
and churn our sweat into a salve
for the waning light.*

*Every flicker grows weighty, waiting
for us to spread glitter-wild, while evening
swells in the mouth like a plea.*

:20

this room's red is spoiling without the ochre of your skin, and
me stripped bare down
to the dark rings of nipple
you'd turn over in your mouth;
my chest thrums with a quiver like
your touch gives, but violent
so far from tender
this rumbles like ruin and you aren't
enough to keep me waiting
in this kind of absence—too, too brittle

outside, you add up my hands. one to pull
at the curtains' seam. one to wrestle my bra
one to tap out trouble
on the bedpost
you've never lied;
sweetness has always pocked your tongue
and you've licked me with the scars
all I'm good for, anyway. Still, my salt has
you counting down the minutes, hoping
for something like us to grow.

:30

*What can you tell us
that we don't already know of thirst,
when even what we can keep from curdling
is spit out of the mouth like rot?*

:40

How far does a voice carry when it is muffled

in the nape of a neck? How loud a promise
to kiss the listening backs of walls? Echo,

you uninvited spirit, was this your trick

of sound? Is dimpled plaster enough to distort
my lilt into another's round timbre? To reverberate

against the skin like touch? In the silence now,

there is no lip print on the glass but mine,
no scent in the sheets but mine, and her myth

fades into every darkening inch around me.

:50

A recipe:

Sorrow is a hollow root. Boil it in 2 cups water, a ½ cup of vinegar, and sweet wine to taste. The flesh will go runny and sink to the bottom. Do not mix; let the separation stay. The slow odor of rust will raise a dizzying shiver. Do not wrap yourself in strangers; let the prickle on your skin stay. Take the tincture, still scalding, from the stove and dip in the ends of your hair. Let the locs drink until swollen, until the heat drips trails down your back. Gather the wet mess like a rag. Start at the window. Wipe down every surface, yes the curtains, yes the lampshade, yes your thighs and to the soles of your feet. Your head will be heavy, too heavy to welcome sleep. Let the weight anchor you to the floor for days, as many as it takes for each strand, full with the room's emptiness, to fall from the scalp. Wring the remaining liquid into a glass. What's left will be a drink mild enough to swallow.