

Second Sleep

You wake to darkness. The moon tinges your room cadaver blue, but beneath your closed door seeps the warm amber of a hearth. People are talking.

You sit up. Yes, it is the smell of tender roasts, spicy pies. Laughter reeks. The ghosts have arrived without an invitation. There is too much night to let it go to waste.

You put your bare feet on the floor, not wanting to risk a sound – not even the shuffle of slippered feet. You shiver, but the cold is coming from your bones and cannot be shaken.

Downstairs you creep, and from the landing, the party is brightly offending.

Mama is aproned, her hair caught up in a scarf. Brother Man eats from everyone's plate but his own. He is gaunt, the way you last saw him—but without the bullet hole. Maybe that's why he is full of smiles. Missy's cheeks are pink from being pinched. She is passed from lap to lap, like a warm potato.

You had been afraid that your presence would poison the gathering, but the spirits don't seem to notice your waft of sorrow and lavender. There is an empty seat at the table that has always been yours. You slide into it. Mid yarn, Aunt Sister passes you a hunk of skillet cornbread.

It's been years since you relaxed in the breast of family, but the dark cloak of December helps you remember. There was once something called a holiday, and the jokes about your cooking were the thing of family lore. The taunting used to make you blaze like a fresh wick. But on this night, you can hear the sweetness in the jesting. Like a pinch of sugar in the bitter greens.

From behind you, two arms slide around your waist. There is a humid breath on your neck, wide palms cup your breasts. Now in your bones, a fire. You lean back against the hard chest. He has come home.

The party disappears. In the old shotgun house, people always knew how to be scarce. He brings you down with a whisper. His kiss is as deep as forever. He plunges you into yesterday, and then, with the brittle snow, he is gone.

The moon has spoken her mind. There is nowhere to go but back into night.