

Legend of My Grandfather

the legend of my grandfather
call him abuelo,
starts on a springwells street corner.

he is standing
on a soapbox yelling for the children
to come close
his hands are prayers,
shadow punches, lessons.

no,
he is warning
how officers will bludgeon
the soft backs
of their skulls with nightsticks
when they hear the howl
of juke joints.

no,
he is a drunken dizzy collapsing
in the crosswalk.

in the legend, he is alone
at the last seat
of a bar named after
a dead man. he is counting dollar bills.
he is *a good one*,

I'm told.
dressed in cotton & gray satin vest.

shoes,
worn but polished. his skin is shadow
that disappears
when it threads through the crowd
gathered around him.
shaking, shaking.

let me start again.

* * *

my grandfather let's call him Jesús
is a dancer.

both playboy & playwright. a muddled thing,

I'm told.
somewhere between barkeep
& border crossing
he is a brown man,
I'm sure of it

the legend goes like this: feet
busy with the heat
of flamenco, flaring merengue.
his friends are brilliant.
barflies & wife beaters, cantors & car mechanics.
both banter & politic backhands, quick fists.

he is blood buried
in bricks of delay,

rotting wood
of an east detroit tenement—

let me start again.

* * *

my grandfather
let's call him fantasma

is a sepia-tone photograph an apparition of ink
wearing a tuxedo & bowtie,
hair slicked to a neat widow's peak
wide nose & close shave.

I watch my own teeth chip & crack
over his tongue. wrestle
each wretched bend of language
trying to learn his ghost's shape.

in the legend
he walks
twenty miles of snow for a job.
hands shaking around
the busy motors of the assembly line.

in the legend,

married the Italian girl half his age
a wild horse of a woman, but there
is no legend about her, only fact & phantom.

she must never
have slept, cradling my infant body
between nightly searches
through the city's laden gloom to find her sons
clung to sofas
& bad debt

arms strung like a lush
& stampeding river

old man:
a happy drunk & turbulent lover.

(how to savor a flawed hero;
watch them, stoic as statue.)

when I was small,
believed he was a matador. I'd wide-eye
the blood as the wedge
shoveled below the bovine's
sharp shoulder blade.

I had
a toy bull fighter caped in red
that would parade around the house.
maybe I named it after him.

maybe it was buried in the catalog
of floorboards, the endlessly
chased smoke.

I do not remember
his funeral. this is a lie.

I do not remember his living—

let me start again.

* * *

wreckage, or
let's call him grave,
call him wraith,
would-have-been—

he is carried in the mouths
of his children, scattering like dandelion plume.

I've never seen his tombstone.
my father would not show me.
 it is somewhere
in this vast city. he hated my grandfather,
 so I did too.
his pine box is replete with maggots
& loose thread (dead by my third birthday;

in the year my father would detonate
 against the women around me,
 turn to smoke too).

my mother hated my father, so I did too.

I didn't know him.
 to this day, I don't
 know if my father is dead
 but I imagine
his face around every corner.

 there is no legend to that.

* * *

 let us call him silently
 escaped prayer
call him rugged. savage. scars I fabricate.
 clothes I'll never wear.
 wrap him in illusion.
plant an immaculate flag on fractured heritage
 like conquistador.

on whispers of the whet blade.
 along the divots
 of a sturdy back.
only claim the amassed postage stamps
 & melodies strung through
the air & shore laced in every warm shot
 I throw back—

let's call this lineage call it severance for a gap
 left untethered.
my heritage, emblazoned
 & disappearing at once

like wounds from the banderillas
blood-letting the beast before
 it charges.

let's call him make-believe-man,

I'm sure of it.

stories trodden to pavement like stain.
elusive as the river

dancing

like a clatter of light,
crashing against the wave.