

POETRY

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The Best Thing Was

The best thing was
two weeks before I hit eighteen
I ran away from home.
I lived with my married sister
for a while.
Not too long though.

I went to this place.
I worked in a factory.
I was on a machine
doing calendars for the holidays.
You press your foot down
you staple, you go
dum dum dum.
Six months
and then I got laid off.

So then my sister said,
"You can go to school —"
It was a class there,
grownups, adults —
and they all knew how to read already,
so I wasn't getting no place.
And I was afraid of getting raped you know,
because it was a bad neighborhood.

After a while
Karen was working late sometimes
and my brother-in-law
he was a sick bird.
He started showing me picture cards
you know.
All naked women.
He had them all lined up
along the bed.
He was looking for you know what.
Well, I told him off
and I told him forget about it.
So he started pressuring me to leave.
I came home from work.
My clothes were outside in a bag.

But I got sick of being used.
Even now, because I'm trying to read
it bothers me.
My brothers and my sisters
they all went to school.
But my mother
her mother died, and her aunt raised her.
She used to feed her in a cellar.
So then I grew up and I looked like that aunt.

Plus my father died young
and my step-father didn't do so good.
"You'll be signed away," he'd tell me.
"Sent to a home. All they'll feed you
will be bread and butter."

And my mother
used to keep me back from school
and I had to do all the cleaning.
You couldn't use a mop
you had to do it on your hands and knees.
You used the wash-board.
You leaned over the sink
and scrubbed and scrubbed.
If she was washing too
and I needed water,
"Go in the toilet bowl," she'd say.
"And get water out of there —"
It was a shame she got away with it.

My sister's friends
They had skates and riding bikes.
And my mother and step-father
they used to both get drunk.
So I got them more drunker.
That's the only way I got out.
I never went to a party.
But I caught on fast.
I never had no clothes to go
so my older sister,
I took her clothes and a pair of heels.
I got them drunk and I slid down
(It's crazy, I was very crazy,
I was desperate to get out —)
I slid down the water-pipe
and through the yard
climbed up the wire-pole.

The third time I got caught.
My step-father hid out and caught me.
I got the strap and a stick over my head.
But you know what I said to myself?
I still enjoyed it
because I never went to a party before.

If someone in the place
they talk about their childhood
I'll walk away.
"Oh," I'll say, "wonderful, very nice —"
but I say to myself under my breath,
Thank God.
I never say I wish I was a kid again.