

SIGNA A. DAUM SHANKS

A Brief Moment of Self-mutilation (February 2000)

As I bathe,
the phone rings
while I stick my finger in a flame
the yellow part divides
and the blue section burns
the pad of my pointer

While I look at this tiny flare
I suddenly reminisce
there was
an arm under the
covers of that spare bed
I slept in
parallel with my
ten year old body
the hand situated
where my torso bent

I woke up but didn't move
he said, while running
his other hand through my hair,
Good morning
I've been waiting for you
to wake up
I've been here quite a while
I've made you breakfast

He turned on his gas stove
the halo of heat and fire
burst suddenly
to cook some more French toast
that I ate
so he wouldn't be mad at me

On my finding-myself trip to Europe
I slept on trains to save money
I taught myself to doze at any time of day or
night

going from Rome to Strasbourg
I pulled down the chair opposite to mine
to make my berth
this older man walked past my quarters
through the glass doors I saw him smile
and take out a match for his cigar
as he trotted to the dining car
his lighting up in the aisle was
a sudden explosion of illumination
that seemed so reassuring at two a.m.

When I wrestled in my dreams
I suddenly woke up and felt an elbow
I realised that man who sauntered by me
had his entire arm down my sleeping bag
I never heard him come in
I never felt him plop himself down
right beside my seat
he smiled again at my now fully-open eyes
and said
the way you glanced up at me
you wanted me here
you want me to do this

The lit candle
sitting on a table beside the tub
broiling my finger
surrounding it with intense heat
only does so for a millisecond
because I exhale quickly,
extinguish the only
radiance in the bathroom
while the phone still rings
and I surround myself with
warm water and bubbles

Signa A. Daum Shanks's poetry appears earlier in this issue.