**Bright Ghosts**

Courtney Justus

Last autumn was a paper lantern

held at my fingertips.

Air grew quickly crisp

under the Spanish moss,

paper ashes flying on October gusts.

My friend said I looked like fall

in my burgundy dress,

all gauze no shimmer,

so I twirled in my hunter’s boots

between old corduroy couches.

She was summer storm, lukewarm chai,

shoulder a smoothed slope

where I rested before we learned

how hours could flow,

could domino into an auburn blur.

I confessed I double-checked every locked door,

cringed at my now-wilting orchid.

I looked at her small hands

and heard wind rustle the spider plants.

When she left, I stood

behind the porch screen,

pressed my pencil ribs

until I felt myself unbend.

I looked in the mirror in an unlit room

and tried to convince myself

there were no spirits there

behind my greying eyes,

as with one finger I traced

the pock marks littering my jawline

like shells buried beneath the sand,

pencil scratches of small decay.

I licked the blunted canines

that bit the insides of my cheeks

until drawing blood,

until no loose skin remained.

Between them, my swollen tongue

no longer sought the taste

of a shoulder blade or damp sugar.

I drew each knuckle

to my mouth so I could taste softness

beneath each scratch.

By day, I watched grease mirage

across my forehead, reached

for my own hand so that

someone was still holding me.

I miss the way my body shapes itself

beneath an autumn dress,

in the languid embrace of chiffon.

A palm pressed to my backroad spine

was once an affirmation.

Until the soil-stubbled boy by the lake,

until gunmetal cadences of shade

reached through his room like frozen fingers.

I came home emptied, no black tea

at my bedside, no faces except

the small woman in the glass,

the phantom lamp outside her broken shutters.

The spirits that crossed his carpeted floor

left by morning for chai and flaxseed bread.

I laid on my scuffed hardwood and asked

for citrus, for something to sweeten

and sting my still-swollen tongue.

No more ghost tasting of Old Tuffy

and strawberry to whisper into my curls.

I walked the beach on the coldest day

just to feel the wind biting me clean.

I darted back and forth from the ocean,

tiptoeing close enough for it to touch me.

I like myself wind-strewn, tendrils tossed

by gusts tasting of brine.

I love how water tastes sweetest when

you’re parched, almost faint.

Every day, I watch my fingers,

rub their creases into some illusion of softness.

When I’m driving through a rainstorm,

Lysol and dust mirage the windshield

in streaks like thinning hands.

I wipe damp palms

against my suede jacket,

rub the tourmaline and ribbons

in my pocket at each stoplight.

I let myself get lost in the cul-de-sacs

off Blue Clay Road, near the shed

where baby’s breath grew in fists

as a woman shouted “I’m done with this”

to the overcast sky and I ran for home.

My once-cracked knuckles are

sanded smooth by balm and shelter alike.

Do you ever run two fingers

across your own ragged hand

just to feel your own skin?

To make sure you haven’t drawn blood?

My body is not a road his ghost

fled by candlelight; her arms are the door

where I held out a lantern to myself.

I still watch the porch for ghosts

promising fistfuls of honey and salt.

I’ve lit candles for each of them

without singeing my fingers,

learned to dance barefoot

on the hardwood.

See here, friend, I’m still

a cherry-lipped girl on tiptoes,

hands lifting like bright ghosts

into the open air.