**The Hard Fine**

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I’ve fallen off horses, one ladder

Out of love and off the wagon

But the most physically painful fall was on glare ice

In the commuter parking lot during my third attempt at college.

Moonlight glistering on the crystalline blacktop

My body suddenly levitating horizontal

Like the girls we lifted thaumaturgic with two fingers

During middle school sleepovers.

Landing backwards on my backpack

A paperback copy of Ulysses the ruination of my mid-spine.

An earnest shout *are you ok* echoing across the lot.

I could hear he was nice down to his bones.

I imaged his thick-gloved hand helping me up.

A cup of cocoa at the cozy café in town.

The little marshmallows. A kiss.

He’d be majoring in engineering or biology

Some subject I couldn’t care less about but he’d have soft hair

And smell nice, his mom would want to bake Christmas nut pies with me

And he’d never leave me bleeding in a bathroom while he ate a burrito.

But I was laughing, which made everything hurt worse.

Made a spectacular ocular lightshow detonate behind my eyelids

And I couldn’t stop, this being back when I laughed compulsively

Whenever someone got hurt, including myself.

*I’m fine* I yelled back, till prostrate, still laughing

Although I was distinctly not-fine, and hadn’t been properly

Fine since I was five, trailing my father into his nightclub before hours

The late afternoon sun making a campfire glow

Down the wood paneled corridor that led to his office

Where he flipped names on a rolodex large as the wheel of life

Made serious calls on a black plastic phone

Counted with wetted fingers cash payments for vendors.

I’d sidle up to the bar and slap my Mickey Mouse doll

On the glazed wood while the bartender poured me ginger ale

With four shots of grenadine.

Orange slices and cherries jammed to the brim.

Man with a Burt Reynolds mustache, turning on the disco ball

Like a god whirling up a new big bang.

Mickey and I would get out on the floor and we would burn

Burn it up good, twiring tarantellic

A high octane, glucosed ballet

Fragile burgeoning identity lost like good money to dice

In the vertiginous wonderwork of turning in really fast circles.

Now, thirty-five years later, lying naked in bed with you

(nice, good-smelling, no pies though)

Blankets pulled to our chins

I prop myself up and ask *what do you think it would be like to be an owl*

And you say immediately, eyes still closed, *awesome*.

And I ask *do you think the owl knows his life is awesome*

*Or do you think he’s just living it* and you say *living it*

And I lie back down, satisfied.

My problem was always being human

Instead of, say, an apex predator of the astral shadow domain

A sidereal cold wind, stars trapped inside a light skin of feather and claw

Changing life and hope into death and night so the sun has a reason

To rise and regenerate us all.

But roughly past age 10—if you’re not an owl—

There is no more of the easy way of being fine.

There is only the hard fine.

The hard fine of saying *I’m fine* through a pasted smile

Of learning to stop arguing and wanting to be right

Which means you have to choose your words as carefully

As picking ripe avocadoes, looking for the ones that aren’t too hard

Or too soft or too bruised.

The hard fine of twirling into yourself instead of out of it.

The hard fine of knowing who you are in your core

Having fallen, spinning furiously

All the way down.