**House of Youth**

Tory Bilski

 It is easy to stay in the kitchen; it lends itself to daydreaming. The countertop brings back your grammar school, the chalk dust, Oreos, and Hawaiian Punch of snack time at your desk. Or the cafeteria where you can order the spaghetti with butter sauce if you don’t like marinara. Fat Sally is still slim; in fact, her mother worries she is too thin and feeds her cream and candied apples for breakfast. And the teacher is a kind but disembodied voice with her knees in nylons and her squooshy shoes the color of Band Aids. No one knows her fate yet either, that she will throw herself off the Tappan Zee Bridge after Christmas. The worst that can happen in this room of yellow kindergarten light will be when a nervous five-year-old leaves a puddle of pee up at the blackboard. But even the laughter and taunting are mild. There is always a window to look out of, and always something to look forward to, like recess.

 The mudroom, off the kitchen, is filled with leaves of dried oak and red leathery maple. If you dig deep into them, you can fish out ice skates and soccer balls, the ribbons from horse shows, the pair of chaps dried with the stucco of manure. This is the glory room, preserving the rites of puberty. To shuffle through all these leaves is a public, noisy affair. Heads turn to measure you up and scrutinize the length of your bones or the points of your eyeteeth. Breasts will come in handy later on, as will shin guards. Under the pine crest, a goalie, competitive by nature, hoards all the balls counting obsessively his saves of the game. And the girl who glides by to look at the trophy wall—the skinny, long-legged one—will always take first place because she never loses her stirrup. Life would almost be fair, except for the likes of her.

 Then there is the bedroom, the room of first love, on the third floor. A turreted corner room with a window seat, it looks out over the frozen Hudson. The bed is a river with a strong current. It calls and the body yields. The racket of steam heat, the wet wool of an Irish sweater, and the drop of patchouli oil that seeps into the humid sheets are the drowsy aphrodisiacs. The room induces narcolepsy. Days drift. No one ever wants to leave, not of their own volition, and depleting as the bedroom is, it will return to you in dreams dark and pleasant alike. There is no getting over the obstacle of youth.

 Until a woman, old as your mother, intrudes carrying a book. She says to get out of bed and stop floundering. She says, you can’t be eighteen forever. This is a point you would like to argue, and reply, but in this room I can be. In this room I can enter at forty and be eighteen. In this room I marry the bed of the moment forever. Love is a madness like any other, she says, dismissing you with her free hand. She treats you like a stray, hoping to get rid of you with a few shoos. She, meanwhile, is the opposite of a stray. She has the strength of resilience from being left behind in the Victorian parlor room of lapsed marriages. She has the deep lines and broken capillaries of a recovering alcoholic, with teeth stained brown from caffeine and cigarettes. Her laugh is a smoked-scarred bass that rumbles the floorboards. She hovers above you with pillar-thick legs. Yet she too succumbs to the torpor, collapsing in the armchair. For her the room is redolent of L’air du Temps and boardwalk taffy. She cannot leave, no matter how much you try to help her up. Her heft becomes intractable. Her book falls open onto the floor and, though there is no print, there is the red ink of marginalia, notes of her thoughts. I won’t go, she says, until I write this story.

 Above the bedroom, not surprisingly, is the attic—the winter room that is filled with snow and stumps of evergreen, complicit in its offer of the premonition of death. In early morning, the snowlight and hoarfrost slip through the ceiling’s cracks and swirl like ether; it puts you out. You can’t move on.