

A Suite of Poems for Carol

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Suite: a series of rooms opening up into one another like the half-built houses we played in with her brother and my sister. Carol's body swinging from the joists, the rise and fall of our voices as dusk fell.

*We better go, her brother;
my sister, It's getting dark.*

*You can't play in half-built houses, my mom scolded,
it's not safe, you could fall through the floor.*

I. the forest floor, its bed of needles.

They are lying in waist-high grass,
buried among its stalks,
reeds of grass
between their lips.

When the tall imposing shape appears,
they giggle.

They are used to people laughing back
but this man doesn't.

He smiles as if thinking of
something far off.

Do you girls want to play a game?

They look at one another,
giggle,

stop,
eyes a confusion of signals.

No, I think not, says Carol and they break
into peals of laughter.

Something is off, everything is off.
 Gone bad. Sour.
 They should be home now,

jump to their feet, brushing grass,
 dirt from their shorts. The man
 grabs Carol, pinioning her arms
 behind her oh no

Everything slows to sickening speed.

II. my bedroom.

The sound of helicopters overhead. Is he in my closet?
Don't be ridiculous, my mother says, but I heard him,
 his body stealthily climbing the wall outside of my
 second-storey bedroom, scaling its rutted brick.

III. the master bedroom.

Or maybe suite implies a matched set of furniture,
 something soft and dreamy like a queen-sized bed
 with one of those luxurious mattresses that guarantees a
 perfect sleep, not these two women clinging to one another,
 weeping in the dark, the father sleeping in another room.
Her mom cried all night, one girl said,
Linda's mom is sleeping with her.

IV. the front steps.

Let us not forget Crystal, her strong legs
racing across the wild expanse outlining
our subdivision, barbed wire and thorns
against ankles and legs,
racing against time, alarm
in her stomach.

Two days afterward.
Sitting on her front steps,
long coltish legs balancing
a bowl of green grapes;
weight of the world.

Her red-rimmed eyes.

My ten-year-old self more astonished
by the fact that she was eating grapes
than anything else, watching the small bulbous
creatures placed one at a time in her mouth,
as if ordinary.

V. the fourth grade classroom.

After she died, her name faded from everyone's lips.
Her empty desk remained behind me for the rest of the year.
I struggled to keep it clean. Reaching behind with a seemingly casual
swoop of my arm, sleeve of my blouse, to erase dust settling on its surface.
My job. No one else's. It appalled me to see it sitting there
in the bright glint of sun, dust motes in the air
like the nanoseconds after her death.

VI. my study.

As I grow older,
the weeping becomes louder,
ravaged.

How to console a woman
whose child has been taken away?

You can't.