

The Gunman and the Ape

by Sally Houtman

I.

You tell yourself at 3 a.m. it's not your fault, it's not your age;
that obsolescence is a phase you're going through. You try to sleep
but can't because the permafrost is melting, because you can't
tune out the tantric rumble from the apartment next door,
because there is a fist-shaped hole in the wall
above your bed where your conscience used to be.

II.

So you count sheep, count blessings; thank god
for incongruity, for the paradox of appetite and famine,
for the synergy of empathy and rage. You count by tens,
count backwards, rewind your life, but the reel
becomes the reflection inside the reflection inside the reflection;
the past, no more than a parking fine you forgot to pay,
the future, an abandoned warehouse at the corner
of *why bother* and *who cares*.

III.

You wonder where it all went wrong. You marched in step
from 9 to 5, kept perfect pace, pledged allegiance to enforced
mediocrity,
until the day they let you go—the day you knew that you were never
Buddy Holly on their plane; just another passenger, brilliant but
doomed.

That day you drove too fast through school zones, touched wet paint,
stared directly at the sun, because you could, because you finally
understood
that there were no rules, only suggestions.

IV.

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You rise at 5, fill your plate with free-range eggs and a side
of indecision, bite back the dull uniformity of it all.
You contemplate the fretwork of your hand—the thin genetic thread
that divides you from your simian predecessors,
from the lone gunman on a turreted roof.

V.

At 5:19 you hold tight to your fork. You can't stop
thinking about the gunman and the ape; you can't stop
wondering how you'll do it, how you will manage,
how you will defend yourself when all you have left
is a keyboard and a grudge.

