

Helen O., Grand Central, 1959

by Kristen Tsetsi

She found a spot near the wall and waited for the 8:17. In that moment, after the minute hand ticked, there was a crazy kind of silence, tin-thin echoes bouncing off the dome. And in that moment, she watched—she always did—as the other tiny ladies backed themselves flat against the wall, clutches clutched in narrow-knuckled fingers and pressed tight and safe to their cashmere-soft rib cages in an “Oh — oh, dear!” Helen tapped her watch, looked at the clock, clicked her shoes and muttered, almost whispered to them—very lady-like and with a head-shake—“Oh, I know, I know, and I—I so wish...didn't have to be here now...this time...they all come...you know...the way they do,” before closed-lip smiling and wincing her way into the center of the terminal just in time for their slow stampede. First, the hats appeared at the top of the stairs, felt fedoras tipped just so or so low they dipped into their eyes, and after that came their blank, unsmiling faces - none of which she gave special attention - and then, and then, and then, their full, oncoming mass, a shoulder-to-shoulder-to-shoulder herd of concentrated power and unstoppable virile energy moving toward her with such cold, steady force that the hot spider-flush crept up around her throat. She gripped her purse handles until her palms and fingers hurt with bruises, until the bulk of them opened up and swirled around her, her stammered pardons and excuse mes and breathy, elated “Brutes!” mingling with the light cascade of their fresh aftershave the way it always did, pressed suit sleeves feather-kissing the skin of her bare arms while she pretended to look for a man.

