



darren francis
skin

I wake from dreams that my mother is dead. Lie on my back in the cold bed, wind sheet-tips in my fingers. The dream edges tears from my eyes, though I know her death is a fiction; I saw her ten days ago, put the phone down to her mere hours before sleep. But I still cry.

I stand, look down at the bed. Only one body's indentation looks back at me. Lucy won't be back for another few hours. I pick up her hairbrush from the bedside cabinet. It is knotted with her long blonde hairs. I untangle them one by one, remember the dream and the trail of childhood the dream tugged in its wake.

A mother astride a half-interred coffin. One foot on each side, toes amongst the wet soil. Twist of mauve-painted ingrowing nail. Smell of turned earth, worms, copulation, blood. A mother held frozen on a hospital bed. Forcing me outward, pushing me forward. A baby squirms, leaves the womb, and out into cold. The doctor cuts the umbilical cord, child wrapped and cast away.

In the bathroom, waiting for Lucy. Windows, half-open, catch the light.

My youngest memory is white walls and bare stone floor. Kitchen; my mother stooped, concertinaed. Sepia memory, mother in pony-tails and floral prints.

To be carried.

To be born.

From a mother who walked for nine months, me curled up inside her. I was born Caesarean, three weeks overdue. Mother did not want to shed me, or maybe I didn't want to be shed.

Curled up with Lucy in my head. Pressed to the floor gazing out of this body. Standing by the pale wall. In the bathroom, stomach pressed against the sink. Sink half-filled with stale water. Tiny hairs hung on the surface. Me spread across the bathroom floor. Plucking hairs from legs with fingers. Four walls around me floor pressed below me ceiling above me unscathed.

By day Lucy works for her money. Home by night she gives it to me. I wait for her to feed me with coins. Can hear next door's television. Laughter. A priest asks for love and money. When he finishes a voice reels off murder statistics. I imagine Lucy placing her hands on the television screen. She has my mother's hands.

My mother's hands holding the child; she kisses its shallow pink head. The child is me, is of her body, the sum of one body slipping down on another, like my body slipping down on

Lucy's. Mother's hands are long and slender like mannequin hands. Under the tap, water running over their backs. I am on the floor, and father standing over me seems so big.

A click of the door and Lucy enters the room. Heels on the laminate floor. Takes off her raincoat. Her face and clothes are freckled with rain.

'I'm wounded,' she says.

'Where?'

She holds up her hand; the swollen thumb throbs the red of an engorged penis.

'Caught it in the door at work,' she says.

I take her hands in mine, gaze at the thumb and then at the rest of her fingers. Split nail. Graze on left index. I kiss the swollen thumb. Want to suck it until the swelling subsides, suck out all the pain.

'Come with me,' Lucy says, and I follow her into the bedroom. Sit on the bed and she stands there looking at me. She has slim hips and a tongue too big for her mouth. She stoops, pushes her mouth against mine. Her skin is warm and soft. My hands find Lucy's spine, and she giggles.

'That's my weakness,' she says.

And the last time I saw my mother I was on my way to meet Lucy. Lucy and me went to a restaurant off of Leicester Square. The couple on the opposite table were arguing and he hit her and split her eye open and she bled all over the table and her Chicken Kiev; I remember thinking, does Lucy know what it means to hurt, or does she only know the pain she can give?

On the bed Lucy shows me her other weaknesses; like the soft skin on the insides of her thighs and how she cries at old photographs.

'I was married by sixteen,' she says, and shows me the photographs. Sombre faces in dark suits and dresses; it looks more like a funeral. How many of the guests knew her stomach was filled with child?

'What happened to your husband? You've never told me.'

'You've never asked.'

'Yes, I have.'

'Haven't.'

'Well I'm asking now.'

'Car crash, two weeks after the wedding. I hated him anyway.'

'So why did you marry him?'

'It seemed like the right thing to do at the time.'

'What about the baby?'

'I aborted it.'

She walks over to the window. Stares out, as if her dead husband stalks the streets below, hand in hand with the child that never was. Turns from the window, looks at me with eyes the colour of dead tongues. Shakes her lemon-coloured hair, removes her 'I Love New York' tee-shirt. Her body silhouetted against the sunlight reminds me of a shadow cast by a sun so hot your skin and sore and you scratch it until it reddens and blisters. I hate the way Lucy can undress when sunlight fills the room.

My face pressed to the floor. That is how Lucy wants me. Bare floorboards rough against cheeks. Splinters bleed me. Dust gathers in the corners of my eyes. I push myself around by raw knees. Two smeared red trails mark the places I have been.

She puts her hand under my chin, lifts my face up. Kisses the top of my head. Anoints me with her saliva. I peer up at her.

She opens my mouth, examines me as if I were a horse; turns over the tongue, peels back lips and prods gums. Takes a coin from her pocket. I extend my tongue. She places the coin on it. I take the coin into my mouth.

'This is the gift of love,' she says.

I feel the coin with my tongue, don't recognise it. Foreign, wafer-thin. Loose fluff.

Lucy sits on an old wooden chair; like the chair, she is spindly and seems to lack a spine. I sit there for hours staring at her skin. Try to imagine myself through her eyes. Can't. Wait for her to speak so I can look into her eyes. She pulls me towards her. Smell of rusty nails. Her head on my shoulder. I am a foetus for her. She stands, walks over to the closet.

'My blue gown. I know you like it.' Smile slightly askew.

She pulls the gown out and I stroke the turquoise silk, soft as Lucy's hands.

When the room is dark I undress, disappear under the sheets. Topless Lucy retreats to the

bathroom, returns wearing her blue gown and nothing else.

'Let me show you the gift of love', she says.

She covers my thin body with her hands. Touches my face while I look at her. Kisses me, her tongue flapping like a fish-tail. I stare at her hands as she closes them around me. With every touch my never-ends shrivel and die. She stands behind me so that I can't see her, must trust her. I like the way that feels; power coupled with shame. Her body smells of old coins. My arms around her waist; appendix scar, line of tiny faint hairs running down her stomach. When Lucy is naked she is another person; dropping clothes to drop ourselves, becoming symmetrical forms with one intention.

Her skin tastes coppery. When she touches me I forget who I am. She folds her body around me, takes me under her skin. The malaise of flesh, the curve of her contorted body on me; we are bonded together. I don't know where her skin ends and mine begins. I am buried under her skin, coursing her veins, breathing her blood. Choking.

When I am inside her she is so changed. I no longer know who she is, why I wanted her in the first place. Want to nullify us both, stare at her unfamiliar skin and no longer care about my own.

When we are finished we lay together in silence, a sweat-soaked heap. Blue gown still wrapped around her; I pull it up, don't want to stain it. We shall remain in this same position, this same place, can stay like this forever. There is nowhere else to go. We need never move again. The first night I spent with Lucy we didn't have sex. We just lay half-clothed in the darkness, kissing and touching. When day's logical light filled the room I was almost embarrassed at how close we'd been. Perhaps if we'd had sex I wouldn't have felt that way.

I no longer own this body, am no longer inside it. I leave what is left of it under Lucy's skin. Oil and factory smells. Perhaps tomorrow we can go out together, and she can buy clothes and food and jewelery. All the things she can use with her money.

'This is the gift of love,' she whispers, and laughs. 'When you were inside me I realised what makes you tick.'

'What do you mean?'

'You're obsessed with the worthlessness of your body.'

'Worthlessness?'

'Yeah. I'm not surprised you don't see it. You don't even know who you are. Why else

do you refuse to undress unless the lights have been switched off first?'

'When are you going away?'

'Don't you want to talk about your problem?'

'When are you going away?'

'Sounds like I've struck deep...'

'When-'

Stop changing the subject.'

Lucy stands, pulls stockings up her legs, her back to me now. I touch her spine, her weakness, but now she is not so weak. Finally she remits.

'Two days.'

'So I've got two days of you before you go...'

'That's so selfish of you, you know? No worry at all about me, or that I have to go, all you care about is when you can see me again. That's so typical of you.'

'You still haven't told me where you're going.'

'What difference does it make?'

'I'd like to know. One of your other lovers?'

My hands shake. My hair falls into my eyes, repeatedly.

'I know you have them,' I say. 'Tell me about them. What are their names? Which one do you like best? How do they touch you? How do they fuck you? Do you prefer them to me?'

'Why should I tell you any of that?'

'Because I need to know.'

'And is that your way of ending them? By taking them away from me piece by piece?'

'No.' Nails bitten to nothing. 'Just my way of measuring the damage.'

'If you must know, it's... my father. He's very ill. He wants the whole family to be there. I don't know how long I'll be gone for.'

'A few days? A week?'

'I don't know. I'm going out. Going for a walk. I need some air, need to get out of this room. I'll be back soon.'

She stands in the doorway and we kiss. Her lips are sour. Next door's dog is barking.

'We all have our weaknesses,' she says.

'Yeah. You cry at old photos, and I hate my skin.'

'One of these days I'm going to surprise you. You'll be naked in the middle of the room and I'll throw on the lights. Then you'll have to look at yourself.'

Clean white grass. Born by the side of the road, or on the bank of the river. A child in school hemmed in by piles of books. A ruler across my hands. Lying in a field by the side of the road watching cars go by. Lying in bed waiting for the sun to go down.

When Lucy returns we share laughter. The green and red bird tattooed on her shoulder where she likes to be bitten; with me inside her she runs her tears and snarls 'it's like slicing.' She splinters beneath my lips like glass and fragile bones and slithers of her pierce my skin and she says 'I can feel you.' She severs my veins and I am buried in her and I hate myself for depending on her and she does not care my semen trickles inside her; she could hold a life inside her body and I could do nothing.

As she sleeps I touch her creamy back, want to curl up around her and become her skin. Hate my body because she must go away from it, repulsed by being inside the body she leaves. can't remember the colour of her eye, only their shape; like eggs inside broken shells. I pull away, a thin trembling nothing dried and spent like shed snake-skin. Want to drop a match and incinerate the room, the bed and our two bodies. Would Lucy ling to me as the flames consume us?