

Fallout/Idaho/1962

Edward Hamlin

She descends in a nimbus of light,
feet barely touching the soaked earth.
She carries a single book, propping it on her hip
like a feather-light child.
The fresh sun stirs and alarms her.
They have not seen her here before.

Entranced,
the boys dip and coo as her face
glides against a field of green.
The first smoke is still on the air,
the fragrance of her unveiling:
For an instant she is perfect, a goddess,
a geisha with black hair and white limbs
smooth as the clay of their making.
Strolling, she is a natural element,
a reflux of sexual waters turned back upon them
when all seemed safe and dry—Hey! they say,
 Get a load of that!
 Go introduce yourself, Rudy!

But the fluent shape will not be caught,
nor slowed, nor wooed in any way known
to boys, keeping instead to the gravel path
drawn through the ferns and dark-loving life,
through azalea and the yews of the lagoon.
Nearer and nearer she comes, a silhouette of longing
more dangerous than they can know.

When it breaks
her explosion is silent.
In passing she turns to look at her lovers
and, like Orpheus, loses them forever.
The two-faced bitch, a boy says, confusing himself
until, gawking, he knows his own meaning:

Some horror, some cancer or flame
or flung thing has japanned one cheek forever,
staining it the color of plums, of the crushed beetles
poets once used for ink,
of warm, dirt-bubbling oil.
The bruise wanders from jaw to temple,
a drunken intaglio,
an open secret whispered in turning.

The boys gape and canter back,
frantically incomplete:
They'd loved her in the dew
of her perfection
as she lit up their America

But now she's charred Hiroshima
far too close to home.
At once her face becomes a map
of the cooling decimation,
a manuscript of the horror.

Birth defect!
whispers one authority

Radiation!
says another

Tokyo Rose!
shouts the third, and spits
without knowing why

But the goddess walks on,
the pang of her hush leaping like
lightning through the drenched ground.
In ten steps her secret
is a secret once more,
melded with shadow
and the blind eye of war.

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