

JESSE LEE KERCHEVAL

Forgive Me

I am having a bad night—
 my legs are phosphorescent in the narrow dark,
 my muscles grieve for sun.
 Will that homely star we call Sol ever shine again? Darkness,
 my mother said, is the habitat of souls—
 weighed down, as they are, by the clay
 God used to make the human body.
 My mother had insomnia like me
 & believed if you lay unsleeping in the darkness long enough
 you might meet God face to face.
 I believed her. But I have never seen Him.
 Everyone thinks God wears long white robes,
 my mother said, but I know different. He looks like Jesus
 just a little rag across his middle
 like that fellow Tarzan.
 You can see what He's got between his legs,
 that rag being so darn skimpy
 & tell He is a real man—husband & father too.
 Now I roll over in my own hard bed. Now the clock is inching forward
 the night crawling on all fours.
 I hold my hand up in the dark—
 starfish, sleepy spider.
 In the end, my mother slept
 for seven months
 making up for lost time
 getting all her beauty sleep
 before she went to meet her God.
He is crazy about me, she told me
 before she rode off in that ambulance,
I love Him too—

but don't you go & tell Him that I said so!

O Mom! May darkness swallow me before I do.

I swear on your white head
to obey for your prohibition—
like a spell in fairy tale we break only at our peril—
prick your finger on a spindle,
eat the poison apple
& risk falling into the dreamless sleep
that took away my mother.

In the end, each story is so simple.

First my mother is born to sleeplessness

then I am born awake

then my mother falls asleep & dies—

I see where this is headed &

I'm much too young to want to sleep forever

so I interrupt this story to sing out in the dark

One enchanted evening, I will see a stranger ...

thinking all the while of God.

I try naming capitols,

counting any animal woollier than sheep.

But my palms itch & the electricity goes off—or at least my clock stops
moving

& the silence whirls inside me

until the room changes into white after endless hours of wearing black

& my arms emerge in day

& my eyes see the Lord of Light

they see the Glory & the Way

Nobody, Mother said, can travel

down these roads alone. *Nobody*, I hear her say