

Self-Portrait of Mormon Middle Child as Isabella

Dayna Patterson

I.

One by one within a month, four siblings bring their grievances before Father, ruler of our domain. The laws of the home are too strict, they complain, no gum in the house—let alone sex or booze. No shoes on the living room’s cream carpet. A three-hour dose of church Sunday morning, an hour of seminary each day. They prefer to smoke pot, join debate club and practice their hot words on the walls of our home, fire bombs through windows. They drink and fuck and play angry guitars in the garage, dip tube socks in gasoline, light them, slingshot flaming baby gerbils, rodent rockets, over the backyard fence. They raise geckos, garter snakes, an albino rat they shoot in the head when it escapes and eats a litter of baby gerbils. They hyperbolize to shock, say they’ve tried heroin, crack, watch Father crumble to new resolve, his whiplash no longer lax. Laws no more a scarecrow where birds perch, forgetting terror. He cuts them off, clips their wings, hurls them into future.

II.

I cloister myself in my room, like a Mormon nun, except there’s no such thing. I want strict restraint, wake before sunrise to walk to seminary, where I claw my hands to stay awake through lessons I’ve heard since primary. I mark up my scriptures to a rainbow of Godwords, learn my favorites first by rote, then by heart, praise fathers from the pulpit, determined to balm Dad’s disappointment, to foil the failures of all my siblings, the sin of coffee far off

as Australia, the sin of sex distant as Saturn
with its chastity belt. I would be a ring of ice rock,
snowbroth blood. I would have God's name
in my mouth to chew on, my sustenance to savor,
a night-and-day saint with my symbols: a vase of milk
-white porcelain with blooming sego,
a golden liahona, compass with needle to arrow
the Godward path I'd follow. I'd place on the altar 18
months of my life, missionary away the days
knocking on doors shut like coffin lids,
wading through thigh-deep noes. I would marry
in a crenellated holy temple my first kiss.
I would sing hymns and hymns to Him,
force my voice *forte*: louder, louder, loud
enough to shake down angels.