

DARK-SKINNED MEN HAVE ALWAYS LIKED

me. Maybe pale skin and red hair are exotic to them. Jamaal is standing up now. I guess praise didn't make him completely honest: he's "95 percent committed" to a girlfriend. I don't want another woman's man in my bed. I have made vows against adultery and have lots of sexual-misconduct karma to purify. I'd rather not reincarnate in the "Hog Palace."

He's leaving fully aroused and more than a little cranky. As he follows me out, his hands still sorting through my hair, I catch a glimpse of us in the full-length mirror on the door. It's hard not to melt back into his arms for a few minutes of oblivion. I feel exquisitely desirable. I want to pour myself over this beautiful boy that the holy beings have tossed to me like a ball of light.

But I don't. I won't have his cheating heart pressed against my own.

I'm pleased. I thought such restraint was beyond me. I'm also disappointed and relieved. His virility would have been too much for my menopausal energies, I tell myself. I shop. I buy an abundance of pretty underthings, though there's no one else I want to show them to. I imagine opening his pants a dozen times a day.

SPRING WAS SO LATE THIS YEAR, I GOT disoriented and planted too much squash, crookneck and zucchini of every stripe. I pick bucketfuls when they're small and tender and leave them at the curb for neighbors or passersby. I like to think of the tender yellow squash sliced and cooked, its seeds glistening in someone else's kitchen.

I'm mindful to keep aside a zucchini of a certain size, a little curved. I decide not to feel ashamed of this coconut-oiled self-service. I like to use a mirror. It makes me wonder what a man sees and feels. Pleasure is beside the point. I need the inner calm that comes when the throbbing has ceased.

I hate feeling so lustful. Men notice my energy from a hundred yards away, and it scares me. Robina, my spiritual advisor, talks me down: "The attachment isn't you, doesn't define you." I wish I had the ability to refine these rampant energies, attune them to a higher purpose. How coarsely we humans collide, oblivious, inexpert, our language not precise enough to name the processes that shape and change us.

PIANO SUSTAINS ME. I'M GRATEFUL I CAN play real music at all. If Mozart's thirty-second notes come out clean, I rejoice. These are hours of self-visitation. I learn to lean through Andante amoroso triplets, laze with the grace notes, snatch the staccatos, land forte with restraint. The Prelude passages arise familiar as hearth fire. Bach's cadences are like healing cheek kisses. It is a tentative moratorium, an opiate as good as sex. But still the hunger, the monumental neediness.

"Watch it like a hawk," Robina says. "See that it is a lie. Don't follow it." Occasionally I glimpse the illusory nature of my mundane attachments. It shakes my core with the same force as desire, and bliss rises softly up my spine.

My body has been dormant, I told Jamaal. "I know," he said. We were together thirty minutes. I offered myself to him. I awoke. ■

Willing

ALISON LUTERMAN

We were making love and it was a solid thing,
a garden made of breath, a city of caresses.

We were making love, even though
it would disappear each time we made it
and have to be made over and over again,
the way God, abiding, renews the world,
every ragged leaf and blade of it.

I admit I was making you, a man,
from dreams and spittle,
from the nothingness we both sprang out of.

I could visualize you tucked
and ready to slide down the chute
of your mother

into this world of pain and plum trees,
waterfalls and volcanoes.

I had been waiting years for you, even in the rain.

We were making love,
melting ourselves down in that crucible,
smooth, soaked, flushed, sparkling.

Already I'd forgotten what year it was.

Already I'd forgotten all the lovers who'd failed me,
all those whom I had failed.

You don't have to tell me now
how the floodwaters were already rising,
the house slipping

from its shaky foundation,
off-course meteors aiming
directly at the cleft in the valley of the heart.

How when I said I was willing
to throw everything into that fire,
the fire heard me and laughed.