

## Waking in a Cheap Hotel

Detroit, 1958

She stretches,  
    pulls at the peeling paper  
just above her head. She lifts her thumb,  
    closes one eye. It's certain  
these faded peonies on the far wall hide inside themselves  
    only to bloom at night.

This man in the bed next to her—what *is* his name? *Mitchell?*  
*Michael? Miles?*

The sun pushes through a hole in the curtain,  
    curses them all  
with too much yellow light. She turns over,

watches the man's chest  
    rise under the cotton sheet.  
Last evening at the club, his music  
    split her in two. She liked how  
he moved on the stage—a big cat in a cage.  
    Later, his teeth would sink into her  
and she would feel whole.

In the distance, she hears the 12 o'clock siren wail:  
    *get up, go home.*

Suddenly, she is sixteen years old.  
    It is the winter she met Harry Jones. Those days  
opened her...saxophones, reefer, torch songs, promises.  
    She still believes in love.

She remembers her mother standing over the stove,  
    singing *Amazing Grace* into a pot of boiling soup,  
her cheeks going shiny from the rising steam.

*Don't be late...*

Mama always pointed at her with a wood spoon,  
    then pointed to the kitchen door,  
slapping the air with each word:  
    *a-man-won't-buy-the-cow-if-the-milk-is-free.*

Now sipping gin from a dirty glass—she gets up, looks into the street.  
Now across the bathroom sink,  
she stares into the mirror,  
    nods, tries to smile  
at the tangled hair, drooping lids, double chin.

Her hand cups her breast.  
    It's round and firm.  
Still young.