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The Cleansing

Ruth Daigon

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The Cleansing

In Siberia, during the wedding, the bride was required to wash the feet of the groom and drink the water. Only in this way was she considered worthy to be taken as a wife.

Kneeling at his feet,
mouth pursed,
shoulders sloped,
she lifts his right foot,
then his left,
soaping between the toes,
scooping dirt from under nails,
doing what must be done,
scrubbing in unleavened silence.

Pale glue of tears clinging to lashes,
she licks her lips tasting the instant
when she was none other than herself
sitting in the kitchen
curtains drawn,
floor swept,
dipping into the curve and coil of wife,
practicing
until she got it right.

One last look over her shoulder
at childhood so remote,
it belongs to someone else.
Nothing's left.
Not a ribbon.
Not a thimble.

The night before, she dreamt of spring shoots
pushing purple tongues through earth's skin,
of babies swimming toward her
slippery as tadpoles
her unskilled hands can't capture.
And in the morning, she awakes
to pinpricks of sun, birds
blading against the horizon.

This is her wedding day,
air thick with accordion notes,
swirling skirts, embroidered shirts,
the smell of borscht and vodka.

He sits like a boulder in the sun.
His voice makes him taller.
When he bends a listening face toward her,
she unknots a smile,
and lifts the basin to her lips.

—*Ruth Daigon*