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Dream of the Soft-shell Crab, Hazel at the Ailey Matinee,
Third and Main, Kneading: Zhang Yu, Fly Girl/Letter to
Bessie Coleman

Tracie D. Hall

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TRACIE D. HALL

dream of the soft-shell crab

in this dream i pucker for a kiss slow in never coming. mama is dead again. i am in the house where i was born. frightened, i lock all doors and open them again. there is a man with a box, its contents wet and horrifying. i am afraid of being left with it and of leaving it alone. it contains all that is left of me.

i never get to the place i long for. fussing over change for the fare, i miss the train. on the platform i see women holding hands, happy in a way i have never been. stand back from the rails i want to warn them. the train is merciless. at any minute its speed can drag you under. they look at me with all their pitying eyes and smile.

even my brother, a one sure thing, is gone fishing. on the phone his wife instructs me that i must learn to cook for myself. i look up at the cupboards, desperately organized, but find few things of use. i take out everything and mix it all together. this is the only way i know to start. how did i get back to this kitchen where all the lights are out, all the bulbs broken, the wiring faulty and at any minute anything could ramble through the unlocked door. how did i lose all protection.

why do i wait here arms akimbo, heart red and liquid in a cardboard box that will not close. do your kisses save salt-water woman. will i eat this dream alone.

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TRACIE D. HALL

hazel at the ailey matinee

she says she could have
been one of those thin-armed dancers
in shimmy clothes
she could have stayed at miss blackwell's
school of tap and modern dance
and had a boyfriend who drove his mother's compact car
she could have relented and let mr. curtis
touch her on the way to the costume room
the way he inhaled the scent
from the girls' discarded towels
you could tell he wanted to
she had breasts after all
and continued to eat cookies and sweet buns
despite her auntie's warning
that she was getting a woman's behind

she could have practiced the piano
every evening like she promised
in honor of her mother's sacrifice
stretching her wide fingers long and straight
though her piano was a pawn-shop keyboard
and she'd never seen a piano in the homes of her friends
yet, she could have been a prodigy if she'd put her mind to it
had a closet filled with velvet dresses
and slippers to match her genius
her feet would have stopped growing
at a respectable size 8
her neck would be graceful, voice higher
an angelic soprano or demure contralto

she could have married a deacon
or been the director of the ebony angels choir
instead of sneaking to the neighbors'
playing the what you got games
she was always a hold out
but liked being close to the action

she could have gone out for the spanish or drama club
if only she could have found something to stick to
she needs something to stick to
she should have prayed about it like the old folks said
and given it to Jesus while she had the chance
instead she is watching
in this darkened cave of a theater
her toes curled double
wondering what to do
with shoes too tight for barbarian feet
she could have
been among the thin-armed
she could have been one of them

TRACIE D. HALL

third and main

and pretending to be chauncey
and not my real life lower middle class no cash havin' self
i walk out of this bake shop in the chi-chi part of town
and i see this lady
this old, old sista lady with sky high black&white salt&peppa afro
(she got on one of grady's hats from sanford & son)
and she hangin' on the corner
and she old enuf to be my grandmama
and she got on red suede pumas, old ones, garbage can kind
with socks rolled down like fat donuts around her ankles
(she got whiskers on her chin)
and she don't go with the 'benzes' or the 'beemers'
and her look don't blend with the scenery
or the art gallery, or the museum of contemporary blah, blah, blah
and i'm thinkin', 'aw, naw she gonna blow my cover'
so from 100 ft. away i reach into my duffle bag for somethin' like a dollar
figurin' as soon as she say somethin' i'm'a throw it at her and cross the street
but i get closer and she don't say nothin'
i'm right in fronta her and she ain't got her hand out or nothin'
she ain't even got one of those styrofoam coffee cups to jiggle change
around in
but as i pass by she look at me right in the eyes
she look at me and touch her face and she say, 'sista . . sista you . . pretty'
i watch her scabbed lips tighten over an unlikely smile
(she got gray whiskers on her chin)
i push the dollar she didn't ask for into her calloused palm
and ask her how she lives
'i got a little room', she says
and lets the rest of the words fall to the sidewalk

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i turn to walk away, but she touches her cheek and points to me again
'sista . . you pretty'
the tears come hot and quick on my face as i run for the bus
because i know
i'm not the pretty one.

TRACIE D. HALL

kneading: zhang yu^{*}

~~(exercise one: choose a correspondent)~~

starting with the letters
don't trust them
every word inflates its size
my name
ten characters combined
takes up half the page

~~(exercise two: ask a question. notice how
the intensity of the brush stroke changes)~~

tell me what you know about compression
what happens to air stomped out of bags
does it return unchanged to the atmosphere
air as any other
does it sense a violence
is it bitter, stagnant
does it avoid festivals and parades
the forcing into balloons
at birthday parties, weddings

see, i am afraid of distending
of growing bigger than i am

there is more to say but again
the size of the words

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(exercise three: establish a point of commonality)

do you get lucy over there
that one episode she could not stop it
the mountain of dough that fanned around
pinning her between stove and hard place
not even ricky and fred with drum and wrench
could help her
ethel came to rescue
tried to tame it bite and chew
her teeth and tongue for weapons
would you be an ethel for me

(exercise four: the brush responds
to varying pressure)

is there any truth
in the tale of tunneling
a secret route to your country
as far from mine as eden
i have seen a gopher hole in the garden
if i start with that
how long until i see your face

(exercise five: by now the brush should
feel as if moving on its own)

send an answer right away
and tell me what you will about your teeth
there is a loaf in the oven
and the door already ajar

*Painter whose artistic production during Mao Tse-tung's regime in the People's Republic of China was suppressed because of perceived subversive content.

TRACIE D. HALL

fly girl/letter to bessie coleman^{*}

your picture
so pretty
i lose my appetite
mama says only crazy
and redboned women
make the colored news

.....

i am a girl
wing-less and brown
it is for the better
wings would catch
in the kitchen
gather dust
in the parlor
there is no room for them
under the bed
we have no closets

.....

dreamed you
in the sky last night
high over the peapatch
windsuit the silk
of choir robes

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ribbons streaming
from your goggles
my name
faintly
beneath the engine's whirl

* Bessie Coleman, pioneering aviator and the first woman of African descent to receive a pilot's license, died at the age of 34 while practicing a stunt over fairgrounds in Florida. When her body was retrieved, a letter from a young girl was found in her breast pocket. The cause of the crash is still a mystery.