

C. K. Williams

THE CAVE

Even though all there was was the television set imagining things
to itself in the corner
and a bed as empty as a plate, the woman who caught me glancing
into her window tonight
glared at me as though I'd raped her and then I was furious too, I
suppose because as many times as I've tried
I've never seen a thing that way, no one making love or undres-
sing or even smashing themselves on a wall with loneliness.
Now, watching my wife undress, I slot my eyes so the watery
blinds blur everything out
but the smudges of her nipples and hair and even with all the easy
lumpiness of her pregnancy,
I can feel what I've never felt: some wonder or dread, the begin-
ning or vestige of some furtive exaltation
and when she sees me, the terror too, so that I feel my arms and
legs trying to be stone.
I had a friend who broke down once and used to keep his eyelids
furled like this.
For hours at a time he'd perch in his raggedy bathrobe on the edge
of the narrow ward-bed,
pointing at his eyes, saying the same thing over and over again:
"Too much fire!"
First one eye, then the other, would go out behind the trembling
shade of a finger: "Too much fire!"
When he was a little better, I used to pester him to tell me what
made him do that but he never would
so we used to talk about money or politics or about a strange, love-
ly girl who was usually in the waiting room when we were
who mutilated herself. Everytime I'd visit, new slashes would've
erupted across her forearms or wrists
and once there were two brilliant medallions on her cheeks that I
thought were rouge spots
but that my friend told me were scratches she'd put there with a
broken lightbulb when she'd run away the day before.
The way you say running away in hospitals is "eloping." Some-
one who hurts themselves is a "cutter."
How could she do that to herself? My friend didn't think that was
the question.

She'd eloped, cut, they'd brought her back and now she was waiting there again,
those clowny stigmata of lord-knows-what on her, as tranquil and seductive as ever.
I used to storm with jealousy when I'd leave her there with him: she was so beautiful, all the hours they'd have—
I tormented myself imagining their coming together and how afterwards they'd tell the truth to each other,
all the secrets I thought I had to understand to survive and never would.
When I picture them again now, though, in that dismal hallway and bring back all the visions I've never had,
I can't help wondering what we keep looking for in the mystery that hasn't already been thrust in our faces?
Some unsuspected iconography of the soul? Our double consciousness, the brute with chains
and the other, the cloud, who's supposed to conceal the barbarous lust it consumes with?
And does the one, while we watch, touch the other, the way humans will with violins or a rifle,
that gently, running their palms over the gleaming, opulent stock and the barrel?
Lying down, I do it, too: plunge into the shadow of my son or my daughter
and feel the darkness, the prism of hidden sorrow, the namelessness of nothing and nothing
shudder fearfully across me and then the warmth, the hide tightening, the cawl, the first mind.