

Best of My Love

To hate Damon would be easier if she didn't

hit him first. Her grandma always said, *If you bold enough to throw one, you better be bold enough to catch one.* Denise didn't give a damn,

when he came home with lipstick on his collar she hit him like she was a man. She wasn't no step-out-on-me, sleep-alone-all-night-type

of woman. To hate him would be easier if she did what her mama told her and always did what he said, if she listened with the love's shine in her eyes

whenever he spoke, if she swallowed all her dreams without choking, only throating the staccato, vibrato notes of his musical ambitions. To hate him

would be easier if he didn't watch basketball with her grandma, granny with her snuff, him with his bootlegged liquor from his cousin and them.

Denise could hate him, could kick him out, could leave him for good if he hadn't whooped that white boy who smacked her ass, if she hadn't

kissed Charles when Damon was gone spinning in Indy. Now, if she could somehow look him dead in the eye without seeing that chubby boy

snot-nose-crying under a Mulberry tree after his daddy died, she'd leave. It would be easy to hate him, easy to rip her life apart, easy to

stitch it, herself, back together, to make a new start.

One Nation Under a Groove

Damon doesn't know who his real daddy is,
only met him once. He gave Damon
a flattened penny with a hole right in the middle
of Lincoln's head and told Damon he could make
a necklace out of it. Damon lost it but remembers
having it, the same way he remembers
that bruise on his arm from when he tried
to catch the switch midair. His mama's tears,
his stepdaddy's fury, Damon remembers.
His stepdaddy lost the family store, lost himself
to alcohol and pain pills. If he could, Damon would
never say his stepdaddy's name aloud. High
all the time on weed, speed, smiling tabs torn
from a sheet, Damon tried best as he could
to quell the need not to be dead like his
real daddy. A shotgun shell burst his forehead
open and apart like a dropped watermelon.

Dazz

Some mornings without warning,
Damon would wake and declare, *I need*

some air, I need my bare feet on the grass,
I need to be anywhere but here. Here

meaning the city, Mounds State Park
being the anywhere. Even his dreams

have clipped wings, Denise thinks, his
anywhere not able to be something more

than the outer borders of Anderson. Black
folks seldom went to Mounds,

preferring Streaty Park with its netless
basketball hoops and trash-ridden

fences so different than the immaculate
and well-kept trails and grounds

of Mounds. Mounds where the hills
were burial sites filled with the stone

tools and bones of the Adena people,
Mounds with its Blue, Black, White,

and Green Ash trees' billowing branches
too weak to hold bodies but wiry

enough for the switches their mamas used
to make them pick and hit them with, always

weeping afterwards. Denise thought her
mother was so strange, so vain to cry after

whooping her backside until Damon told her
about his mama locking herself in her room

all evening after one of his beatings. Picnicking,
eating red grapes and the bologna sandwiches

Denise makes, under shaded canopy, the forgiving
grass between their toes, they almost forgot

they better not be caught at this park after dark.

Make Up Your Mind

*Girl, you can't be down on the floor,
on all fours, Denise's mama says,
your knees and elbows will get too dark
and won't a nare man want you when*

*you get grown. Denise doesn't wanna get
grown. She's heard Nella and Lisa talking
about acting grown and playing lay and stay
with Floyd and Marcus. Denise still wants*

*to play Tonk, Pokeno, or Spades with her
Auntie Daisy, who knows everything
about basketball, gutting fish, and music.
Playing lay and stay is not on Denise's radar.*

*Saturday morning when the grass's still
wet from whatever sweats and labors
in the night, and the moon's in the opposite
side of the sky as the sun, Denise sprints*

*the full 3 blocks to her Auntie's house.
Smoking Pall Mall Red 100's, Auntie Daisy,
big as day, sits on the porch with Denise's cards
waiting for her. Denise asks her Auntie*

*exactly what playing lay and stay is.
Daisy replies, *Girl, come sit down here
and play these cards. We always playing
cards, ya hear me now, always playing cards.**

*Everything a card game. Denise plops down
and eyes her cards. *What you bidding, Baby?*
Denise answers, *I ain't got nothing. I gotta go
board with four*, her furrowed brow looking over*

*the cards. Daisy sucks her teeth, shakes her
head, *Tsk, tsk, no risk gets you nowhere
and nothing forever. I'mma put you down
for five, and you better play like it is your life.**

Get up to Get down

Denise can't find herself, can't see herself, only Damon,
always only Damon. She stands behind him in the mirror,

adjusting his tie from behind, asking him, *Does it look good,
does it feel fine, does it feel too tight?* The way his lips reveal

his brash, half-smile answers her question. When she isn't
working at Guide Lamp, most of Denise's life's spent

taking care of Damon: ironing those cut-your-finger sharp
creases in his slacks, scrubbing his shirt collars with bleach

until those yellowed sweat-spots released themselves
from the fabric, cooking the meals he greedily eats without

even leaving her a little bit for her own plate. He's always
on the go, fleeing, in the act of leaving: *I gotta go see*

*about twenty dollars I let Odelle hold, I gotta go set up
for tonight's set, I gotta go play pool, I gotta go play dominos,*

*I gotta go throw dice with Jamie and them, I gotta go
to the record store in Indy for some new music.* The same old

excuses fall from his mouth as routinely as December snow.
It's all the same, all the same. He always has some good reason

for leaving her home all alone, all night long, staying up
until she's cursing herself out in the mirror, still

unable to find herself, still unable to see herself any clearer.