

*In Time*

*First Place, Senior*

I was here when you came into this world,  
kicking and shrieking,  
red-faced like the rosy apples  
which hung heavy in the orchards.  
In a matter of months, your grasping, childish  
fists would reach for the scarlet fruit,  
tart juice running down your chin as you ate,  
and as your mother laughed.

As you played, entranced,  
spinning a top against the tiles,  
the nurse showed you your sister.  
Wrinkling your nose, you asked why she cried so.  
In time, when Juno saved her from the fever,  
she was given her name; you told it to her and  
I heard her giggle with the thoughtless  
joy of a newborn.

(You eyed me with suspicion that day,  
as if I would tell your parents that  
you swiped a honey-cake from the shrine,  
your boyish misdemeanor subtle as

a bear breaking into a hive.)

With the passing of the years,  
there was a great funeral,  
and your emperor passed on to the skies.  
But he was become a god, after all,  
so you did not see why your father's head hung so low.  
There was talk of wars from long ago, back  
when your grandfather was a youth – when  
I, guardian of your house, was newly cast.

I heard you playing ball games in the street,  
laughter arising as dust motes in the house  
trickled  
in  
like a slow-dripping leak,  
darting swift as minnows  
where your sister's nimble feet  
broke the air about them.  
An amber sunset spilt light across the grain of the table  
and filled my patera with liquid gold.  
Your father came by to clean my shrine,  
offering strong-smelling incense.

The beard grew in on your cheeks.

I was here when your father glowed with pride,

just as I was here when your mother sat

by the hearth while you were abed,

wondering when it was that you grew taller than her.

I was here the day you returned home from the ceremony,

bull placed in my care, bold in your white toga

and boasting to your sister.

You came back, triumphant,

from the first hunt,

a brace of hares upon the table.

Your father poured a libation for me.

Joy is impermanent –

there was soon one less in the family.

Your mother, O child, passed to the fields below.

Your father grieved; I was left gathering dust till your sister,

face worn out with weariness, remembered me.

When small, you and she shared secrets

and whispered together

and thought nobody was listening,  
though I was there and locked every word in my heart.  
On the eve of her marriage,  
with the toys of her youth taken away,  
you sat together again, looking into the glowing  
ashes of the hearth as your mother did before you,  
your hearts still those of anxious children in a growing world.

I watched you stop growing,  
even as that world continued to do so.  
You held yourself with worry, then bravado,  
then settled, easy confidence.

There was a wife, a bold mischievous woman  
whom your father disapproved of,  
and whom your sister (ever disciplined  
when small for her wild and laughing ways)  
considered a marvel.

There was an infant, and then there was not.  
You cursed me for not protecting it and  
your father offered me the first fruit of the season nonetheless.

But in time your wife bore you a son,  
a frail withdrawn child who cried to see the sacrifices at the temple.  
You despaired over his ill health and gentle ways  
and loved him more than life itself.

The decades bent you with age,  
faithful to me as your father was before you.  
Your son had three daughters running around your house,  
who begged your wife all a-clamour for sweet bits to eat.

As the skin hung looser on your bones  
and your spirit less tightly tethered,  
you prayed to me more often.

And when your body failed you,  
and the last breath passed from your lips,

I was there.

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