

Cracks

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My grandmother was a witch;
at least that's what my father
called her when he was drunk
on Jack Daniels and Johnny Cash.
She wasn't really a witch, but she was
superstitious, and she taught me
to avoid black cats and ladders,
and to fear Friday the thirteenth,
but especially not to step on cracks
in sidewalks, and to stay away
from suspicious interstitial spaces.

My grandmother was a fortune teller,
but she didn't know her husband
would run off with their neighbour,
leaving her in limbo with six kids and no
way to pay the bills except by reading
tea-soaked leaves for soul-searching
strangers. My father said it was a sham,
that she should be ashamed of herself
for taking their money in exchange
for false hope, but she just gave him
the evil eye and socks for Christmas.

My grandmother had a voodoo doll,
with button-black eyes; she showed me
how to stick pins in all the right places.
I collected silver hair from brushes
and watched her cast spells and curses
to cause pain to ease her own.
She used a Ouija board and heart-
shaped planchette to teach me how to spell.
She taught me well: I won spelling bees
and silver dollars for sentimental stories
with happy-ever-after endings.

My mother couldn't spell,
but she could make believe behind
Jackie Onassis sunglasses.
According to my grandmother,
my mother had the gift, but she refused
to use it. She said she didn't want it;
she said it was a curse,
that there was nothing worse
than knowing the future,
because tenses make no sense
when you can't change them.

My grandmother told my fortune
when I was thirteen and deemed old
enough for tasseographical truth.
I drank all but a teaspoonful
of the bitter brew and threw sugar
over my shoulder instead of salt,
for luck. When my grandmother
looked into the cup, she paused
and said she couldn't see anything.
I thought she meant I had no future,
but perhaps it was just invisible.