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## Five Rooms

Lisa Lewis

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## FIVE ROOMS

*To put it in a different perspective  
exchanging one's house is a form  
of ransom.*

*—House Beautiful*

1.

I sit before him and he leans down  
From his tartan chair, Uncle George Levy  
With two white wings of hair stiff-combed  
From the temples. He shows us tricks  
With cards and dice, and once he caressed  
The feist Dixie, so the kids like him.  
The three-room apartment on Academy Street  
Is full of knick-knacks and a wife from Chicago  
Who gives me ginger ale and peppers  
So hot they make me sick, but I don't let on.  
I crow in the kitchen with the dish-towel roosters  
While Aunt Gaye Levy's white prune thumb  
Dents the meat loaf, slips into the milk.  
She talks to herself, and instead of stockings,  
Wears leg make-up in shades of clay.  
I find streaks of it on the pale slipcovers,  
Flat paste with a peculiar smell.  
I'm not the kind of child who breaks things.  
For my reward Uncle George takes down  
A pewter lamp in miniature,  
And it's mine to keep. I don't rub it  
Till I'm alone, lightly at first, in easy fear  
Of what I'm really too old to believe in.

2.

I find a book on Mother's bedside table  
With words in it I must look up. Still  
I'm never told enough. For weeks  
I think that "penis" rhymes with "Venice."  
The characters, Renee and Chad,  
Combine in ways I can't imagine,  
But setting is something I understand.  
In the shrubs by Chad's window  
I'm a criminal, wiping the fog  
Of my breath from the glass  
As if I could name what I see in there.  
They're close, but the window's between us.  
The two hands' motion, one  
Around the curtain pulley, one spread flat  
On a slack hip, is downward.  
Renee turns a lamp to the wall,  
Snaps it off. The room, a shallow box,  
Is made secure, but to me as I linger  
At the chapter's end, the quiet's a threat.  
There's something outside with me  
They're deaf to, and something in there  
I haven't been told. If it's love  
In the room with Renee and Chad,  
They'll be invaded. The walls won't stand.  
From this side even I can see  
Their room is dark and close to the ground.

3.

Rena pays me to watch the kids  
While she goes out and her husband stays,  
Playing poker. All the men  
Have ponytails, and one I like  
Wears a leather pouch with fringe.  
He cheats to be seen — he tucks the cards  
In his cap and sleeves — and soon  
They're all bristling with aces, all  
The men, and laughing.  
Donnelle, home from a ballet lesson,  
Whirls to my lap and sticks out  
Her lip, with its shining inch-long wart.  
Steven twists the head from G.I. Joe  
And the baby, J.C., rolls his solemn eyes.  
He still can't talk. His thumb  
Is spatulate from sucking.  
I stand outside the poker game.  
Now I wish they'd stop the dealing  
And turn to me, but they don't look up;  
Rena walks in, with grocery bags;  
They don't look up. The stack of chips  
Before the one I liked is tallest.  
Lucky for us, I leave without speaking.

4.

The question before me, as it was then,  
Is security, and where to find it,  
And how I find it differently from you,  
And how it always adds up to escape.  
I think we're born to bare ourselves,  
But I know no one can stand it.  
There's a story I used to tell  
And laugh about, that I don't find  
So funny now. A party on the west side,  
some generic home in the ticky-tack,  
And the blast of water in the bathroom sink.  
The conversation's at a standstill.  
An abandoned bourbon colors the carpet  
In the shape of a lolling tongue.  
I open the bathroom to check the tap  
In time to see Pete slide the razor  
Safely across his wrist.  
There's not much blood. A compress could save him.  
His wife, whom he loves, laughs in the bedroom—  
Our coats are there too, in heaps on the floor—  
But he doesn't look up.  
It's worse for him to be caught at this.  
What I do to help is apologize and back away.  
His privacy, I say to myself.  
Let someone else deny him that.

5.

There are rooms to which I still retreat  
Because danger is not enough to lure me out.  
I make my bed on the hardwood floor,  
and a silverfish crosses the book as I read.  
From the way it rushes its fringe of legs,  
I know it shares my love for shelter.  
My stupid fear of the silverfish—  
Some childhood legend, they drink from your eyes  
As you sleep. It's quick enough to get away  
Just once. I catch it with a second try, and oh,  
It's easy to end that life. It's not that simple  
To be rid of me, but not so hard  
It can't be done. It will be done,  
While I'm indoors, surrounded by the walls  
I've built for death to blow down.  
The long eye of my room looks down, with me  
At center its slender pupil, where light comes in  
And nothing stays out. It's raining  
And a man walks unprotected, his t-shirt wet  
And stretched down his back. It could be me  
Out there, with the man in the rain.  
It could be the threat is the same indoors.