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Woman's Work

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“WOMEN’S WORK”

NANCY COOK

1.

She is standing at the sink, pale green
rubber gloves up to her elbows. Outside
the window the sun hides behind the trees
and the lone homestead fox scuttles across
the frozen backyard shallows. The one
standing at the sink loves this scene
but she longs for the warmth of longer
days, her hands impatient to burrow in dirt
instead of sudsy water, to bury pumpkin
and sweet potato seeds, stake tomato
plants and trellis the beans, arrange
geraniums and marigolds in fine order.

But she finishes washing the dishes, and
after, kneads her chapped hands with palm oil
the fragrance of hibiscus, his favorite. She
massages her husband’s shoulders while he
catches her up on the news, the latest on NPR,
in the *New York Times*, edited down to essentials.
By the time he gets to sports and local updates
he is so ready to enter her, she can sense it,
and she is agreeable, she will satisfy his longing.
Later, she waits for him to drift off. She retreats
to the living room, there to watch the movies
she loves, with strong female leads, or foreign
films, subtitled, an elegant glass of merlot close
at hand, bare feet tucked beneath her thighs.

2.

She keeps a volume of Anna Ahkmatova’s
collected works in her bedside table drawer.
Her husband asked her once, “Do you like best
Ahkmatova’s early passionate love poems or
her later passionate political poems?” “Yes,”
she’d answered. Today he glances at his i-pad,
says “Oscar nominations are out.” An odd
figure, this Oscar, androgynously slim
and featureless, gold gloss, a long crusader’s
sword concealing masculine parts, if any.

(How fortunate, as winners are prone to grasp the statuette with such ferocious enthusiasm just there.) Ninety-two years old, the coveted little man. Largely unchanged.

And this year, the nominees are...

Wars, mobsters, muscle cars, Hitler youth, sociopath clowns, bloodsport-style divorce, drugs, sex, and murder, family, greed, and murder, and oh yes, Little Women. Based on the book written by a woman. Movie directed by a woman. A woman not nominated for best director. As no woman was nominated for best director. What is it Ahkmatova wrote? "Who will grieve for this woman? Does she not seem too insignificant for our concern? Yet in my heart I never will deny her." I never will deny her.

3.

In the old study where the fireplace still crackles every winter with the blaze of burning oak and ash, each has a writing desk. His and hers. Although it is Friday evening, she is seated at her computer, typing. He adds a log to the fire, glides up behind her, asks what she is working on. They've agreed weekends are for home and leisure. "I'm writing to your daughter. Tomorrow is their seventh anniversary." "Really?" he says. "I'd forgotten." He settles in a comfy chair at hearthside, picks up his tablet, resumes a crossword puzzle started earlier. "Speaking of anniversaries," he says, "tomorrow is the fourth annual women's march." "Yes, I know," she says. Back in 2017, they'd talked of driving down to D.C., but in the end had stayed in Nashua and watched on television as streets across the country filled with (mostly) women voicing opposition to the new president.

A giant blown-up photograph of that day is on display at the National Archives, official keeper of America's history. The photograph, however, has been doctored. The protest signs in demonstrators' hands are changed: any reference to female anatomy removed,

all mention of Trump expunged. The whole thing depoliticized. Ironic. So this is how history gets revised, one erasure at a time. And yet, haven't women made strides? Barely one hundred years ago, they couldn't even vote. And now, just this week, Virginia ratified the ERA, the final state to do so, guaranteeing, with constitutional fiat, women's equal rights.

4.

There's still work to do. The Justice Department proclaims the days of burning bras are long past, the ERA is dead, the proposed constitutional amendment having expired. "Any interest in a road trip?" She looks up from the laundry she is sorting. She's interested, no matter the destination. But she asks, "What do you have in mind?" "An exhibit in the city. A collection of artifacts, women's work in science, architecture, trade; as artists, printers, undertakers. Also writers, naturalists and midwives, et cetera." Her eyes grow animated, the laundry is forgotten. "When can we leave?" On the train, she reads about the woman curating the collection, her quest to find and safeguard evidence of women's independence. Two hundred of her best finds make up the display called "Five Hundred Years of Women's Work."

She recalls that decades ago, as a graduate student, before marriage or a career, she read a book entitled "Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years." Now she wonders what has happened to those other 19,500 years, she wonders where all the years have gone.