

ARIEL'S BACK

By Susan Hodara

It is a precious night when you let me lie down beside you, my presence still able to soothe you before you fall asleep. At 15, you permit only snatches of old pleasures now — an abbreviated hug, a few moments beside you in the dark until I move too much, or brush a leg against yours beneath the covers — until I'm dismissed again with familiar disdain. "You can go now," you might tell me, impatience barely concealed.

You are hailing fragments of rituals we used to share bedtime after bedtime when you were younger. Sometimes reading, sometimes singing, always snuggling, you leaned your head against my shoulder, balled your body inside my arms beside my heart. It was time that interrupted us, scattering our patterns, until by now you will, occasionally, put yourself to sleep without even a "goodnight" projected across the hall from your room to mine.

On the other nights you are torn, wanting and no longer wanting, calling up abandoned soldiers, auditioning them for future battles and all too often finding them lacking, outdated, unreliable for the new world ahead. "Where are you going?" you whine, as if I should have known better than to kiss you and turn my back to leave. "Come here," you insist, as if it weren't love but fury that drove you. "Scratch my back," you command, but judge my strokes too short, my aim too imprecise. Sometimes you tell me, "Just lie there," and I do until I feel the momentary jolt of sleep entering your body.

There are nights when you want me to write on your back, when I trace the letters of the alphabet, A through Z, in slow, elongated fingertip lines that meander across the narrow plane of your skin. You lie on your side facing away from me, your back rounded

and pushing closest to me. I'm never completely comfortable; I'm between my back and my side, one arm squashed beneath me, the other reaching across my body over to yours. I hold it so my finger touches you lightly but firmly. By the time I've hit T or U, my upper arm is heavy and fatigued, but I continue, unwilling to complain or relinquish my remaining time beside you.

I remember that same back before you could speak, facing out to me from the slippery bottom of a shower stall in a condo in Florida. The water rained on you and your sister, naked after the beach. She twirled in the spray as sand spiraled down the drain, while you, too young to stand, sat down and leaned slightly forward into the drops. I watched the two of you, readied with soap and soft towels from the dryness of the rest of the room. You were silent as you turned towards me; water streamed over your cheeks and matted your dark hair over your forehead. You reached for my hand and guided it with surprising determination behind you towards your back. Then you moved it up and down, up and down, to show me.

Now at night, when I'm invited to join you at the end of your day, I see that glistening baby and recall the conviction in her grasp. I remember my delight in scratching your wet back then, and feel it somehow even sweeter when given the chance to scratch it now, dry, warm, on its way into sleep.