Little White Birds by Natash Ayaz

**A JULY EVENING.** Years ago, in the rose garden, his hands on a woman’s dress.

I will never forget the way they looked—hands of a pianist, hands that pressed alcohol on my scrapes like holy water—caught there in the act of betrayal. I wished the woman’s head would fall deftly from her neck to the grass. A trophy for my trouble. I stood in the rosebush behind the stone wall in Stintino, witnessing the dismemberment of my childhood. The roses were pink, not red. The color of a kitten’s nose, or cold chicken breast. The woman’s body bore through its constraints so that the silk bloomed into creases, syrupy yellow like limoncello. Despite my callow rage, I leaned closer, thorns against my fingers, stomach melting into my thighs. When my father began to inch the yellow dress upward, I turned and ran up the path to my house.

It had happened twice before: my witnessing. Once earlier that same summer and another time the summer before. Always in the rose garden, my father traced the waistlines of strange women. Every incident, I thought of my mother: wiping her hands on her orange skirt, smelling of cilantro, laughing at a line in one of the sizable novels she read. I thought of how my father touched my mother’s face, fingers trailing her jaw, mapping familiar territory. Something about that touch was different than with the women in the garden, though I couldn’t say what. I was too young to understand the intricacies of possession. I thought of how my mother’s mouth would fall into an injured O, how she might never again hold my chin and say, “You look so like your father,” and I could not tell her about the garden. I worried that, like the window-flying white birds I sometimes found lying on our balcony, the ones my mother called her little soldiers, she would die. I worried that her face, closer to a sister’s than a mother’s, would shrivel decades before my eyes. Back then I understood, probably through some fabular bedtime story, that knowledge could change appearances. I knew that the mind could disrupt the skin, sadness in symptoms. I began to look for evidence of my father’s duplicity in his body. A persistent rash or a drooping eyelid. Any small blemish would have sufficed, but he remained beautiful as ever. From his forehead to his toenails, my father was perfect.

That last time I saw him in the garden, I heard him following me while I ran up the path. I have a theory that men walk with heavy footsteps. They don’t care about disturbing the peace because the peace never occurred to them as important. Women, in my theory, walk with a tender footfall, toes kissing the ground. This generalization is based entirely on my parents. As I got older, I made an effort to think of my mother whenever my feet touched the earth. My tread grew light as a forest fox, out of respect for my mother and a conspiratorial urge to sneak up on my father. I fancied myself the secret police of my mother’s regime. That summer night, I fled the scene barefoot, carrying my shoes, one in each hand. My father grabbed me by the collar at the base of an Aleppo pine and looked into my eyes, pointing a finger in my face.

“You will not say anything to her. You don’t know what you saw.”

I nodded. I didn’t tell him that I had already caught him twice before, that on my own I had decided not to tell my mother, that I hoped his black hair would turn to wire and fall out. He made me put on my shoes. We walked home together. At the threshold of our house, he withdrew a single pink flower and presented it to my mother with a bow. She smelled it, smiled, and put it in an azure glass on the window sill. In the middle of the night, I left bed to throw the rose out the window and then close the window tight. By morning, a bird, body like a drop of milk, lay dead outside the glass like an omen.

I never told my mother what I knew. When my father packed his bags a year later to live in another country with Yellow Dress, never to be seen by us again, my mother took me by the chin.

“We haven’t lost a thing,” she said.

Last week, fifteen years after my father’s departure, I received news that he had been found dead in the bathroom of a chalet in the alps. Stress cardiomyopathy. I spent the day scrubbing my apartment spotless and scouring my hands. In every room, I sealed the windows to suppress the sudden scent of roses, persevering through time like the truth.