

She was black. Like wood in a fire, glowing in the flame's heat, just before cracking into paled ash. Not burnt, as others said, but burning. On her head she carried a vessel full of men.

The men were of all colors.

Her father. The one who left her. The one who remained only to treat her as a part of the home, an appliance.

Her husband. Who beats her. Who confines her to the house the way his father did to his mother. Who respects her only if she acts just *like* his mother— that is, if she gives him the same care and dedication as she would her child.

Her brothers. The younger ones she raised and who grew up to take her for granted. The older ones who bullied her mercilessly. The *prized* twin.

Her boyfriend. Who expects her to have sex with him, but not too soon. Who pressures her to have sex with him if she waits too long. Who acts as if she owes him because the sight of her is more than his poor little balls can bear.

Her friends. Who respected her when they were young, and disrespected her when her breasts became the most significant difference between them. Who looked at her as only a potential fuck.

Her lover. Who is gentle, tender, patient. Who nonetheless relegates her to the role of woman, beneath him.

She was eternal.

When she saw Her for the first time she stumbled. Her skin shined. Bronze. Brass. Gold. She was different colors as the light found her in different places. Her hair was tightly coiled copper, springing down from her scalp. Most importantly, she carried nothing.

The second time was while walking to the river. The men wanted to get close to the water, but not to submerge more than the edges of their lips. Kneel, they urged her. Lean your head down so we can reach. The strain was too much, she thought her neck would give, plunging her face into the water as the men weighed down her head. She gained strength when she saw Her reflection next to her. By the time she was on her feet, She was gone.

The third time she fell. Looking Her right in the eye, her knees caught. She could no longer see the ground, just feel the vessel on her head and the approaching woman in her eyes. She reached up a hand to steady the weight on her head. It was too great and she found herself collapsing.

The basket— for that's what the vessel was, wide and shallow with men's legs lazily lounging over its sides— was the last to fall. Only when the men tumbled out did they notice anything wrong. As she lied on the ground, they yelled at her. *What have you done? You careless bitch. How could you be so selfish, lying there while we have cuts and bruises to be tended to.* When they bored, they simply left, looking for another woman's carriage.

When she tried to rise and follow, a pain sliced through her ankle and sent her back into the dirt. Help, she cried. Only one turned back, face filled with pity but not sympathy. After all, *he* was not the one to break her ankle.

Her hand was the first answer to her cry. Followed by her smile. Followed by her eyes. Followed by strong arms to lift her up and hold her. *You are black like a crow, a little bird* She said. She couldn't help but smile, her

breath caught in her throat and her insides feeling like wax in the sun. *Lean on me, I'll take you somewhere safe.*

She looked around, unsure. No sign of her men. She looked down at her foot, nervous. She could go nowhere alone. She looked up into Her face, feeling warm. <Take me home. Where do you live?> *Somewhere new, somewhere safe. With you.*

Off they walked, one's arm around the other's shoulder, another arm wrapped snug around the hips. Hands touching wherever possible, a new connection in its infancy, an old freedom reborn.