

Dante's Inferno, circa 1961

Patricia Fagnoli

I walked in to the blast of bump and grind.
A stripper in blue light was jiggling the yeasty dough
of her breasts in the face of a front-table guy.
He was there in back, clouded in cigar smoke,
just as I'd feared, drinking strega with five paisans.
Beneath my black maternity sweater our third child
thumped in my belly. He hadn't come home;
he never came home. It was 1 a.m. I was twenty-three.
I left the children sleeping. Left them!
I would have escaped if I'd known how —
no skills, no family, his dollars gone to ale,
the horses, Coronet Brandy.
Poverty. We lived it. The stove repossessed,
the cheap sectional worn through to foam.
More than forty years later I can barely say this.
He wouldn't leave the club. I begged him. He ignored me.
So I sat alone at an adjoining table
in the crowd of tables. Big Chief and The Duke
har-harring as my husband, showing off, slid a dollar
from his suit pocket and lit it.
My eyes filled as the flame rose
from his silver Ronson to the bill, its fire curling
toward me, a tongue flicking, as if
the devil himself was teasing.
I breathed in its acridness, what could I do against this?
Nothing. I did nothing.
He's dead, the children near fifty. What stays?
That fire curling toward me, it still curls toward me.
I want to shriek at them: Pickles, Red, Mike the Count,
all of them, want to yank what is left
out of the burning air as if it is one dollar for milk,
one dollar for bread, one dollar toward rent,
one small necessary dollar.