

JULIA CAMPBELL JOHNSON

Doing Time

Light through the window,
three o'clock in the afternoon
pressing a yellow solid inside.
It is sliced by Venetian blinds
into bars. I am uncomfortable,
perched on the tight, round cushions
of a Victorian sofa.
My hand, small and clenched,
bounces hard against it.
From the other room, sounds
of adult conversation around
a table that bears no food.
Cigarette ghosts visit through the doorway.
I have been taught of this family.
I have been taught in church
that hate is a bad thing,
and I do not do bad things.

Roanoke

It seems just a moment ago I looked up from my meal
in this restaurant to the mezzanine
where a group of young men and women

gather for drinks. They are gone now, but before,=
they were high-spirited, with great bursts of laughter,
and the mirror behind the bar

captured, even magnified it. All that's left there
now are the colored, bottled spirits.
Sitting outside before—today a tourist—directly

across the street from where my father
took me every month to get my braces wired.
He would lead me by the hand to the orthodontist's chair

for the dreaded monthly sessions, always followed
by strawberries and whipped cream—
an unspoken bribe. I would have followed him

anywhere, and did—to that dark place
from which I have just recently returned.
He wouldn't believe what they've done to this place—

a good paint job and a couple of neon orbs outside.
Looks out of place, with the old Coca-Cola sign
still on the side of the Jackson Bank and Trust.

Before dessert, I excuse myself, look out
across the restaurant filled with warm wood
and crushed red velvet. I study the spiral staircase

down which the young men and women would have come.
How could I have missed them,
with their gaiety and hope?