

Ernestine's Insomnia or If Wrinkles were Her Greatest Worry

Marlene Pearson

"Don't sleep on your face," Ernestine's mother always said,
"You'll get wrinkles."

Ernestine buried her face deep in the soft percale
comforting, imagining gravedirt.

People said, "Think of something pleasant
when you can't sleep—a meadow, count sheep."

Ernestine saw worms, counted them as they laced her eyelids
leaving grit from wherever it was they came
upon the red of her eyeballs.

A list of should's kept repeating like a taped recording
in her head: Buy a black skirt, look "appropriate"
for the divorce hearing. Call the lawyer,
or was it the baker, the candlestickmaker, la, la, la—

Her doctor jumped the fence into her mind.
She mumbled: I don't want to see you tomorrow either.
I quit your army. Too much marching
wrinkles my feet.

Instead of sheep, Ernestine heard her mother's worn-out words,
"Don't talk to strangers" (but she does),
"Lock your doors" (she doesn't),
"Bar your windows before you go to sleep."
Ernestine breaks bars with bare dreams
if she ever gets there.

She remembered being small, the preacher warning,
"Ask forgiveness nightly, all have sinned.
You don't know what you did wrong? Your ignorance,
refusal to admit, is sin enough to get you into the fires of hell."
She stammered out his prayer and swallowed his communion—
stale cracker and juice that stuck in her throat
like the dried, hairy skin of an old man.
She thought: Preachers' shoes always bend up at the toes.
Wrinkled leather. Too much prayer.

Tonight, Ernestine tried sincerity:
Pray for this sinner, oh lord—
so I won't get wrinkles. She rolled over scrunching her face
like a prune into the pillow and thanked the goose feathers
for so much comfort.