

Faces of Grace

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Bali & Montana

*[A] mystery, confined in little space
the whole world's wonder in a single face.*

—Conrad Aiken

A white bat flies into the mango tree.
Erratic, it darts through wet leaves
and disappears. We are left looking
at dangling fruit dancing over the pool.
From the rooftop restaurant two terraces
above, the song “White Christmas” wafts down.
My friends start singing about sleigh bells
as we bask in the warm morning of a foreign
December.

Then a memory flits within me—
our family's first winter in Montana.
My father, younger than I am now,
pastored a small church. For the holiday,
he rented three, hay-filled sleighs drawn
by draft horses. My mother stuffed my brother
and me into Moon Boots and mittens.
With the congregation, we sang carols
beneath a sky of stars, horses belling forth
on glittering snow, their breath making brief
clouds in bright moonlight. We arrived
to a tended bonfire and hot chocolate served
beneath ancient firs. Around the fire, all faces
glowed orange. But when I left the circle
to refill my cup at a table set deeper in the trees,
everyone became a nameless shape.

I've forgotten every face.

Wham!'s

"Last Christmas" begins, and I'm back
at the edge of a rainforest, poolside
beneath bougainvillea, with chicory coffee
and my fellow teachers on winter break.
I'm wearing a bikini I bought for a song
in a land where you can get an hour-long
massage for five dollars. I've forgotten the face
of the woman who gave me that massage,
though I recall the three-walled room,
its fourth side wide open to the rice paddy
and the palm tree reaching inside.
I look down at the length of myself
and hardly know the woman I see—
a yard taller than the girl decades ago,
bony and bundled in hay on a sleigh,
not knowing *what* Bali was, let alone where—
or where most of the world was or how
to move through it. When I look
at myself decades from now,

please may I

see a being who traced a path
of grace on this earth.

Please may I

have learned more
than geography.

Please may I

remember the faces I meet
and the lives behind them.