

The House

After, “The House,” by painter Shiva Ahmadi

Once again our building—and most of the city block--loses power. Outside, streets are dark, hectic and tense. Here, in the kitchen, there is a degree of comfort, even consolation. We live on the eighth floor of the apartment. My brother stands at the window, hands pressed against its sill. My sister and I sit slumped together at the iron and glass table, which holds a plate of tomatoes and parsley for tonight’s salad. We watch the flickering candles, set around the kitchen, take in the smell of onions, pepper and rice our mother cooks over a gas burner. Later, we will share ice cream, now softening inside the refrigerator. My sister, brother and I will top ours with nuts. Not mother. Hard bits of food bother her teeth. It is evening. This morning, we take her to the dentist, a kind and handsome man, who happens to be our good friend and neighbor. His office is on the first floor of our building. The work he does on mother’s mouth is extensive, painful. He removes an entire tooth, its root, and bits of bone. In the waiting area, I distract myself from imagining her suffering by looking at the room’s astonishing carpet, its swarming, scattered, fragments of red and of gold. Mother has always been strict about us children cleaning our teeth, but has not cared so carefully for her own. As a result, they are unhealthy. Now, she should rest, but insists on cooking dinner. I watch her, in slippers and a belted housedress, gently stirring the carefully spiced food. Its smell and sizzle drown out the street noise. I see her cheek jut out as she moves her tongue into the back gum area where she had been treated. My sister starts to chop tomatoes, and pushes a bunch of cleaned parsley toward me.

This afternoon, an explosion rocks our apartment. It knocks a mirror, with a jewel encrusted frame, off its place on the wall. The frame is undamaged, but the glass shatters completely. We sweep up as much as possible, but doubt that we find each and every sliver. Our concern is not for ourselves—we wear slippers indoors—but for the paws of our cats. We confine them to our apartment's backrooms.

My brother moves away from the window, gives mother a hug, brings the glass salad bowl to my sister and me. She fills it with tomatoes. I add parsley, along with lemon, oil and salt.

Mother turns from her spot at the gas burner, starts talking softly. Her focus is on bodily infrastructures: capillaries, vessels, veins, and the fluids traveling these passageways. She wonders what a selected patch of this might look like; she imagines it looks lovely, imagines it resembles a carpet, or tapestry, imagines the body section and textile to share a visual rhythm. Their texture, however--glossy, wet, glistening, as opposed to soft and dry--would dramatically differ.

My brother smiles, shoves hands deep in his pockets, rocks back and forth, says one thing mother does, and teaches us to do, is to put everything in pictures. We learn from her, he continues, to take a situation, and frame it as something to view, see, examine. In a sense, she turns situations into physical objects. My mother answers that she does not understand what he is talking about, and asks him to set the table. We sit down to our meal: rice, onions, tomatoes, tea. Mother cannot yet eat, but wants to sit with us. We talk about how long our power will be off, what our neighborhood might be like after this round of explosions. We agree to invite the dentist over for dinner later this week. We decide to take another look for glass shards on the floor and carpet in the morning, when it is light, so we can let our cats out of the backrooms. We discuss replacing the broken mirror. My brother suggests that we simply re-hang the empty frame. A gesture to remind us we are amid change. A gesture to emphasize that we must invent, and learn, ways to manage uncertain transformation.