

Poem

BAD

Grace Tin Yan Lam 

You're BAD, Mama said
I wouldn't be left alone with you.
Silently you crept
Under hems of fabric
And alighted, with your hairy hands
On unsuspecting dreams.

These things I knew not, of course
For you were tamed, long ago
q.d. and *q.h.s.*
Into a silent, placid, velvety creature
Toothless, munching only air.

And so what she said
Seemed faraway
The kicks and heavy beatings
Filed, locked away
With the smell of mothballs.

Until I met people like you
Stripes parallel but different
Fluttering to fly, straining against
Cuffs that held them
From crashing into the ceiling.

Were you once like that?
Tossing, morphing in the summer night
Spreading your mind for the first time –
Big, wild eyes
That stunned even the shadows.
You were invincible, the wind carried you,
Wings spanning more than you knew.
In enlightened frenzy
You reached for the sun
Dazzled, you fell
Right back to where
You belonged.

You mumbled apologies
Again and again
Soft powdery footprints
Receding into the dark
Folding yourself
Back into your original cocoon.

She almost forgave you then
The threats, the blade
Of your sharpened breath
The constant check
On what lurked in wardrobes
Looking over
A shoulder too high

She handed you over
They wrapped you up
You spun, they blurred
Till you were still, ready
For change
Into true, vivid colours.

Breaking through, you found
With dismay, the same
Old patterns, dark, dull –
Doomed.

Never affirmed, never adored
You were one in a long cycle.
Where does the worm end
And the man begin?
Which part was bad, and which
Was you –
The Grandpa
I never knew?

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Royal College of Psychiatrists

The British Journal of Psychiatry (2023)
222, 184. doi: 10.1192/bjp.2022.174