

THE PAPER BOY

The little girls were best friends
who walked each other home, their feet
sliding through pungent eucalyptus leaves
and toothpaste-green nutshells scattered
along the winding street.

They had seen the boy before, watched him
pull the flat newsprint from the white canvas bag
slung across his shoulder, marveled at how
deftly he tucked the edges into a neat 3/4 fold,
how he flipped it with his wrist and flung
the paper missile onto the driveway.

It made a satisfying thud.

He was maybe nine or ten but he didn't
go to their school, he lived in Marin City
in the apartment blocks built for the shipyard
workers during the war.

Used to seeing him whistle toward the sky
on the street that curled up the hill
above the bay, they felt familiar enough to taunt him
with their rhymes, the sort of barbs little girls hurl
at boys from a safe distance, innocent
flirtations, testing the waters.

The girl with the long ponytail said goodbye
to her friend and looked forward to reading
her favorite comic in *The Journal* when she got home.

The eucalyptus creaked in the wind.

It was so quick

how the boy came out from hiding behind a tree,
grabbing the white Peter Pan collar of the girl's shirt
before she even saw him, his smooth brown cheek
so close her eyes had to readjust.

*You better not be calling me any more names or I'll whup
your ass from Here to Kingdom Come.*

We were just playing. We won't do it again. I promise.

She felt the warmth of his measured breath,
saw the even shape of his teeth, the astonishing curl
of his jet black lashes. She looked into the boy's
hazel eyes and forgot
to be afraid.