

Alina Stefanescu

playing possum

after Bayard Rustin

This is my mother newly dead, Mom says. She died without suffering.

I fondle the photo of my maternal grandmother playing possum. A dead possum in a ditch is called *roadkill*. A possum who's just playing is not a *carcass*. The women in my family will play anything to make you wonder. I am one of those women who finds herself playing. Just to see what you'd say about me then.

The woman in the photo is my namesake. The photo is black and white, taken and developed by my grandfather. He was a gangly husband, a polymath, her fellow physician. They married in med school. Stars of the show, those two. It was my tall reticent grandfather who administered the final morphine injection when the cancer took over her brain—when she was no longer the person she might recognize. He did this in secret without consulting the family. He did it in the living room of the remote Transylvanian chalet he designed and built by hand. Her green and white wooden dream house, a retreat for their retirement.

He did it because she wanted to remain herself. She made him *promise*. She made him promise again. She said *if you love me . . .* He signed her request with a blue fountain pen from Czechoslovakia. The request lay among papers and photos he preserved, images of her naked breasts, a voile nightgown,

smiling sepia, Alina, winsome, hungry, amorous, and finally, finally, faceless. Two slender hands crossed in languor over her lower chest. An Orthodox cross poised above the v-shaped limbs. A flock of birds on their way to warmer shores. Above their wings, a cardboard icon.

"I am an atheist now," he announced. But no one believed a man who hated God so much could ever come to disbelieve Himself. This was Ceausescu's communist Romania. I know hate is a kind of hope. These lines in my hand, a Balkan mutation.

me and the king

In a Transylvanian village they speak of a king
who laughs with one eye and weeps with the other.
He keeps me company in the valley between city buildings.

Have you ever wept when losing your journal in Manhattan?
I cry with one eye and lie with another.

Hop the subway to Coney Island so a mermaid can recover
my story. At least one story in life needs a mermaid to end
things. And the sky is too much—the sky is a certain
tinge of fire when the poet accuses,
the podium weeps.

Sul ponticello

... for *Jongino* in Romanian is a mouthful