

MOTHER WITH PAUL

NEWMAN AND SMALL AXIS

REBE HUNTMAN

If I could see nothing but the quiver
on her red lips, I would know everything
about the girl she clasped inside her handbag.
I would know this was a café where doors spun open
before they closed and a woman might
for a moment remember who she was.
If I could see nothing but her eyes I would know
how my father warned her not
to embarrass herself, and I could reconstruct
the night my mother met Paul Newman —
How, one hand holding a vanilla cone,
she smoothed her skirt with the other
and went to him, this her only offering —
She was a fan. How she grasped for the next
slice where the circles of their lives
might intersect — the weather, his latest film,
two smiles flashing before exhausting themselves
and my mother rejoins my father, still bursting
with the largeness of the world.
I could fill her vast purse with dreams
of inhabiting the center of someone's universe
the way stars do. I could slip her girlhood in my pocket
and, wearing my questions like
tiny Rorschachs webbing at the corners of my own lip,
I could become the woman who turns,
brilliant, as Paul Newman calls her back,
every nerve in the place tuned to hers as he tells her
Ma'am. Tells her, Ma'am.
Tells her — Ma'am, I think you dropped your
ice cream in your purse.
If I could trace the fall
of her shoulders, the stain caught between
her hands, I would know what tied
her to the small axis of our lives.