

## **fine china**

i learned to be a man  
from the china cabinet  
in my grandmother's home.

a porcelain patriarchy  
housed in his wooden body.  
my inheritance

behind his tall glass face  
passed down for so long  
it feels like he's always been there.

my grandmother says the fine china  
is for special occasions.  
this is one of her favorite lies.

there is never an occasion  
that warrants him open  
or vulnerable.

he is only there to impress guests.  
the dining room his stage  
he performs—stability.

every man i know is a performer.

more display than practice  
or practicing some display  
learned from other men.

my father tells me  
boys don't cross their legs.  
so i tell my brother the same.

i tell my friends  
i've lost my virginity.  
they tell me it's about time.

i've lied about my body count  
so often i forget the real number.

i'm most manly when i forget.

my grandmother warns me  
not to run too close to her fine china.  
even she walks around him cautious.

how easily breaking  
becomes another's burden.  
fragile things take up the most space.

my father believes a man  
should provide everything  
for his family except an apology.

he told me, women love persistence.  
if you ask and she says no it's only  
because you haven't asked enough.

so when a woman taught me  
rejection i gave her the resentment  
that belonged to him.

when i ask my grandmother  
where all of this came from.  
she says,

the gold-rimmed tea cups  
came from a mother.

and their twin saucers  
also from a mother.

and the egg-white plates  
painted with blue flowers

from another mother.  
but we did not build the kiln

that hardened you rigid,  
opaque boy.

so i ask her,  
what does a man leave behind?  
and she says nothing.

some nights  
while my family sleeps  
i imagine sneaking

inside the dining room,  
grabbing the cabinet by his neck  
and throwing him to the floor.

he shatters.

i take off my father's shoes  
and walk barefoot  
through the glass.

with each step  
i hear a crunch beneath  
my feet that echoes his voice—

he says boys will be boys

so i tell him  
this is a mutiny of manhood.

i paint my nails bright colors  
and cry for no reason.

he says boys don't cry.

so i sweat  
and purge his poison.

i tell all my niggas i love them  
and they say it back.

i sing a love song about a man  
and don't change the pronouns.

he says pause.

so i move backwards.  
rigor mortis before bitten dust.  
breath before conception.

and i hear my grandmother's uncaged laughter.  
her joints say there is just too much time in the day.

so we kick up our feet  
and rest.

- *David Gaines*  
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