

Lamplight Editions

Small Hours

Junia Okafor



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SMALL HOURS.

POEMS FOR THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

BY

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PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

MMXXVI

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For everyone still awake, keeping the small lamp lit.

*The night is a long room we cross by feel;
the lamp we carry is the poem we keep.*

Adela Voss, Field Notes for the Sleepless

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I Nocturnes

I.1 The kettle

At this hour the kitchen is a country of one,
its border the ring of light above the stove.
I wait, and the water waits with me,
and the kettle keeps its own slow counsel,
warming toward a word it will not say.
When it finally speaks, I am the only one
who hears the small announcement of the steam.

I.2 The hallway clock

It measures nothing I can spend,
only the distance from one breath to the next.
Its hands are patient as a nurse,
turning down the long ward of the night,
counting the sleepers, counting the awake,
counting me among the second, smaller number.
I love it for its refusal to hurry,
for the way it keeps time the way rain keeps a window.

I.3 Insomnia, with cat

She arrives without knocking, folds herself
into the warm parenthesis behind my knees,
and sleeps the sleep I came here looking for.
Her breathing is a small tide going out.
I hold still so as not to disturb the ocean,
and somewhere near the shore of that, at last,
I feel the sand of my own eyes grow heavy.

2 Streetlights

2.1 Four in the morning

Nothing is decided at four in the morning,
which is why I trust it more than noon.
The street is a held breath between two days,
and morning is a rumor the streetlights refuse
to confirm, guarding their small amber faith
until the sky can be persuaded to agree.
I stand at the glass and take their side.

2.2 The last bus

It passes empty, lit like a chapel on wheels,
carrying no one to the edge of the map.
The driver lifts one hand, not quite a wave,
more a way of saying we are both still here.
Then the red eyes of it dwindle down the hill
and the quiet closes over where it was,
the way water closes over a dropped stone.

2.3 Toward morning

The dark begins to thin the way ink thins
when you rinse the brush too many times.
A bird tries one note, thinks better of it,
then tries again, and this time lets it stand.
The lamp on my desk goes suddenly ordinary,
outshone by nothing I can point to yet,
and I put down the pen before the light can name me.

About the author

Junia Okafor writes at night, which is the only honest way to write a book of nocturnes. Her poems have appeared in small magazines and on the walls of a few sympathetic cafes. She has never once been awake for a sunrise on purpose. This is her first collection.