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In Other Words / The Sheets of Our Youth

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Two Poems

by Susan Hays Bussey

In Other Words

Whenever a man calls me “a strong woman”
I know to get ready for what’s coming next.
There will be some reckoning; he’ll test the claim,
The need for strength thus written into my future.
He may explore architectural integrity.
Or investigate my tensile limit.
Such men want to see what I will take,
How much I hold. It’s not a compliment.
I am a strong woman but
I am strong like coffee
(Take it in—see how you’ll change)
Not like a Glad trash bag.
I’m strong like whiskey straight
And I will not bear the weight again.

The Sheets of Our Youth

A Poem in Response to My Sister's Post on Facebook

The sheets where we slept were king-sized
for those eight years we shared the battered mattress,
and we fought over them
as though they weren't sufficient for our child-sized frames,
(as though each other were the threat of thievery in bed.)
They were hand-me downs to our mother from hers:
The cast-offs for a daughter who married ill (twice),
Laundered and dried and ironed
For those years before we got them
By Lizzie, who kept our Grandparents'
Basement smelling like starch year-round.
The sheets of our youth were manufactured in the 1950s
In textile mills in the Carolinas, or Virginia
From cotton grown in Texas, or Alabama,
On farms that were owned by men and not yet incorporated.

So when you announce you are looking for
The smooth, crisp coolness of
The sheets you remember from your youth?
You are misguided by terminology and technicalities.
Percalé? Low-thread count? Irrelevant.
You will not find those sheets in this or any lifetime.
But since you are looking
May you find something to fill the space,
To spread over a woman's place of rest
With all the texture of memory.

Susan Hays Bussey is an Associate Professor of English at Georgia Gwinnett College where she teaches composition, American literature, and sentence diagramming when she gets the chance. She earned her PhD in American Literature at Washington University in Saint Louis. Dr. Bussey has special interest in representations of gender and age, and critical race theory. She has published and presented on works that explore racial and gender identity, including Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and Harriet Jacobs' *Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl*.