

from *The Americans*

3. *Help*, 1968

After a photograph from *The Americans* by Robert Frank

When I see Frank's photograph
of a white infant in the dark arms
of a woman who must be the maid,
I think of my mother and the year
we spent alone—my father at sea.

The woman stands in profile, back
against a wall, holding her charge,
their faces side-by-side—the look
on the child's face strangely prescient,
a small dimple furrowing the space
between her brows. Neither of them
looks toward the camera; nor
do they look at each other. That year,

when my mother took me for walks,
she was mistaken again and again
for my maid. Years later she told me
she'd say I was her daughter, and each time
strangers would stare in disbelief, then
empty the change from their pockets. Now

I think of the betrayals of flesh, how
she must have tried to make of her face
an inscrutable mask and hold it there

as they made their small offerings—
pressing coins into my hands. How
like the woman in the photograph
she must have seemed, carrying me
each day—white in her arms—as if
she were a prop: a black backdrop,
the dark foil in this American story.

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