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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