On the Subway

The young man and I face each other. His feet are huge, in black sneakers laced with white in a complex pattern like a set of intentional scars. We are stuck on opposite sides of the car, a couple of molecules stuck in a rod of energy rapidly moving through darkness. He has or my white eye imagines he has the casual cold look of a mugger, alert under lowered eyelids. He is wearing red, like the inside of the body exposed. I am wearing old fur, the whole skin of an animal taken and used. I look at his unknown face, he looks at my grandmother’s coat, and I don’t know if I am in his power – he could take my coat so easily, my briefcase, my life – or if he is in my power, the way I am living off his life, eating the steak he may not be eating, as if I am taking the food from his mouth. And he is black and I am white, and without meaning or trying to I must profit from our history, the way he absorbs the murderous beams of the nation’s heart, as black cotton absorbs the heat of the sun and holds it. There is no way to know how easy this white skin makes my life, this
life he could break so easily, the way I
think his own back is being broken, the
rod of his soul that at birth was dark and
fluid, rich as the heart of a seedling
ready to thrust up into any available light.

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