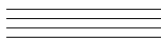


U N D A R K



N I C H O L A S F R I E D M A N

“... contains real radium and will glow for years.”

Not light, but darkness partially defied.
Hunched above powder and squat jars of glue,
they painted numerals on paper faces,
pointing the camel hair between their lips.
“Don’t worry,” their bosses said. “A little bit
of radium will give you rosy cheeks.”
And so they reveled in self-luminescence,
sneezed lightning through the pitch of bedroom sky
and glowed like faint auroras in their beds.

Their jaws plumped up like decorative gourds,
grew soft, and soon their teeth fell out like seeds.
Some blamed the paint. Others carried on
dribbling the green-white liquid through their curls
and mocking up mustaches for a laugh.
Fear only turns the key on what it knows.
One girl daubed her teeth to spook a lover
in the grin-lit dark. Now, in that other dark,
there’s still a bit of light left in her bones.

—for the Radium Girls of Orange, N.J., 1917–1926