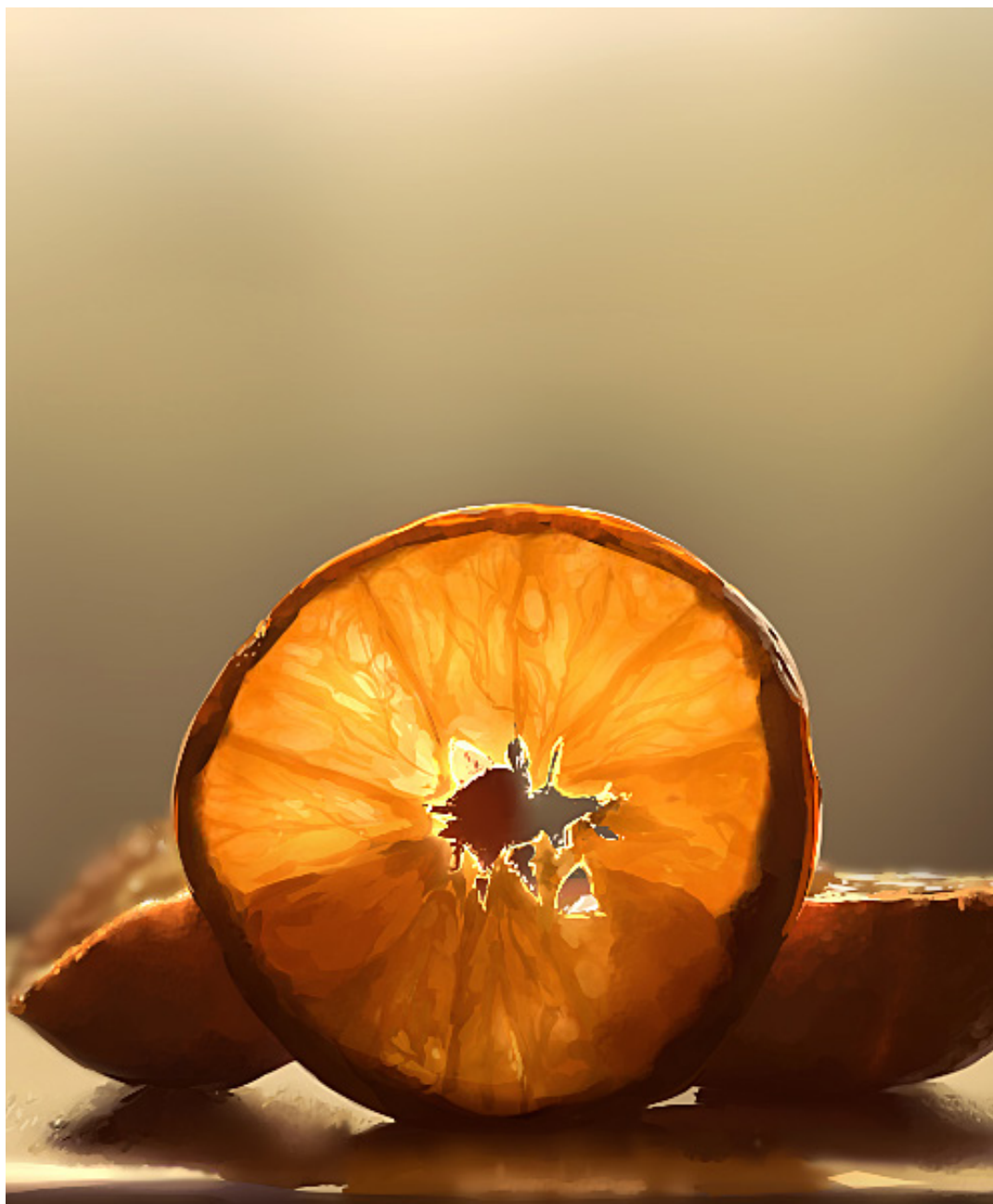


lullwater review

VOLUME XXVI



A JOURNAL FOR THE LITERARY ARTS

lullwater review

VOLUME XXVI

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Lullwater Review (ISSN 1051-5968) is published twice annually by Emory University. You can find us in the Poets & Writer's database, the *Index of American Periodical Verse*, the *American Humanities Index*, *Every Writer's Resource*, and *Duotrope*. We are also a member of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses.

Subscriptions are available for \$15 per year (institutions), \$12 per year (individuals), or \$10 for a single copy of either the current issue or one of our back issues. For subscriptions outside of the United States, add \$8 per year. Please make all checks payable to Lullwater Review; email to Lullwater Review, P.O. Box 122036, Atlanta, GA, 30322.

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Editor's Essay

Margaret Pavleszek

Dear Readers:

We are thrilled to present to you Issue XXVI of the *Lullwater Review*.

In this turbulent and uncertain time, we are happy to say that this issue covers a broad spectrum of topics in a variety of forms and styles. I would like to take a moment to sincerely thank our contributors of poetry, of visual art, and of prose for sharing their talents with us. Your work is different and sharp and biting. Though it may be easier to escape our own hardships through literature and art, it has become in recent months more difficult to do so. Instead, literature can help us to cope, to heal, and the fight. I believe that this issue of the *Lullwater Review* has the ability to fill all of those needs.

Now more than ever, we must remember that the arts have the power to bring change. Though the phrase might be a bit hackneyed, the sentiment shouldn't be. Words keep us angry. They keep us passionate and interested and alive. The current state of the world has the capability of leaving us punch-drunk. Sometimes it feels like there are only so many hits one can take. I have taken some. I will take more. The same goes for everyone else. But we are not punching bags. We have fists and we have words. Though they may be bloodied and may be bruised, they are better weapons than some can hope to have.

I cannot offer enough thanks to the team behind this issue but I will do my very best. To Maya Bradford, whose work on the layout on this magazine is incomparable. I do not know, nor do I want to think about, where we would be without you. I offer a thousand thanks and my utmost gratitude.

To Mattie Worsham, whose constant support and insight I would not trade for the world. You gave me the confidence to believe that I could do this job and no words could possibly do you justice. Also, thanks a million for laughing at my jokes.

To our lovely advisor Bruce Covey, you are an absolute gem and your help with this issue has been invaluable. A most emphatic "thank you" for all that you've done for us. It has been an absolute pleasure.

Last but not least, to the editorial staff that worked to bring this issue together. Your insights and your dedication are beyond measure and you are the best editorial staff that I could possibly hope for.

Thank you for taking up Issue XXVI of the *Lullwater Review*. We all sincerely hope that you enjoy it.

All the best,

Margaret Pavleszek

Lullwater Review Editor-in-Chief 2017-2018

Pumpkin

Changming Yuan

Right at the foreground of the season

In an abbot's kasaya

You sit there

As if praying for the whole land

In an unheard voice

Last Night Is the Past, Too

Gail Carson Levine

I come from the Hudson River rocks
in craggy upper Manhattan,
where my friends and I mined mica
with our fingernails, the pearly sheets
no bigger than a postage stamp and fragile
as a Necco wafer. How cleanly they
cleaved apart. I felt like geology.

David comes from Harrison Valley, PA,
where he and his sister talked from branches
of side-by-side pine trees, where
Mr. Dibble cut his hair in the barber shop
where plastic behind the chairs saved
the floral wallpaper from pomade.

Now we're from Brewster, NY, where
glaciers herded the rocks and boulders
that shoulder up in our backyard, where
a mason made stone walls for milk cows
and a farmer built our house from local oak
and burred the beams to hold plaster,
where Barnum & Bailey kept circus horses,
where every spring the softening ground
sends up debris: the curve of a teacup,
a tiny blue bottle, the top half of a doll
with a spring in its neck.

Last night, David spattered himself
from the frying pan, but felt fine
in a minute. Burns don't hurt me much,
either, so I looked online. Burn pain drops
in the old, pressure pain rises—
findings from a DARPA study, I said,
to discover how to torture elderly terrorists.
David laughed.

Old Age is the Stage You Don't Want to Enter and Don't Want to Leave

Gail Carson Levine

David's cheek is wet.
Before, the surgeon talked like a person.
She has a good flower name, not Tulip.
She said David would walk the nine miles home from the hospital,
but his blockage is a rock.
He had to lie still for five hours
after the three-hour non repair.
Meanwhile, I was a fraction
with two good legs.

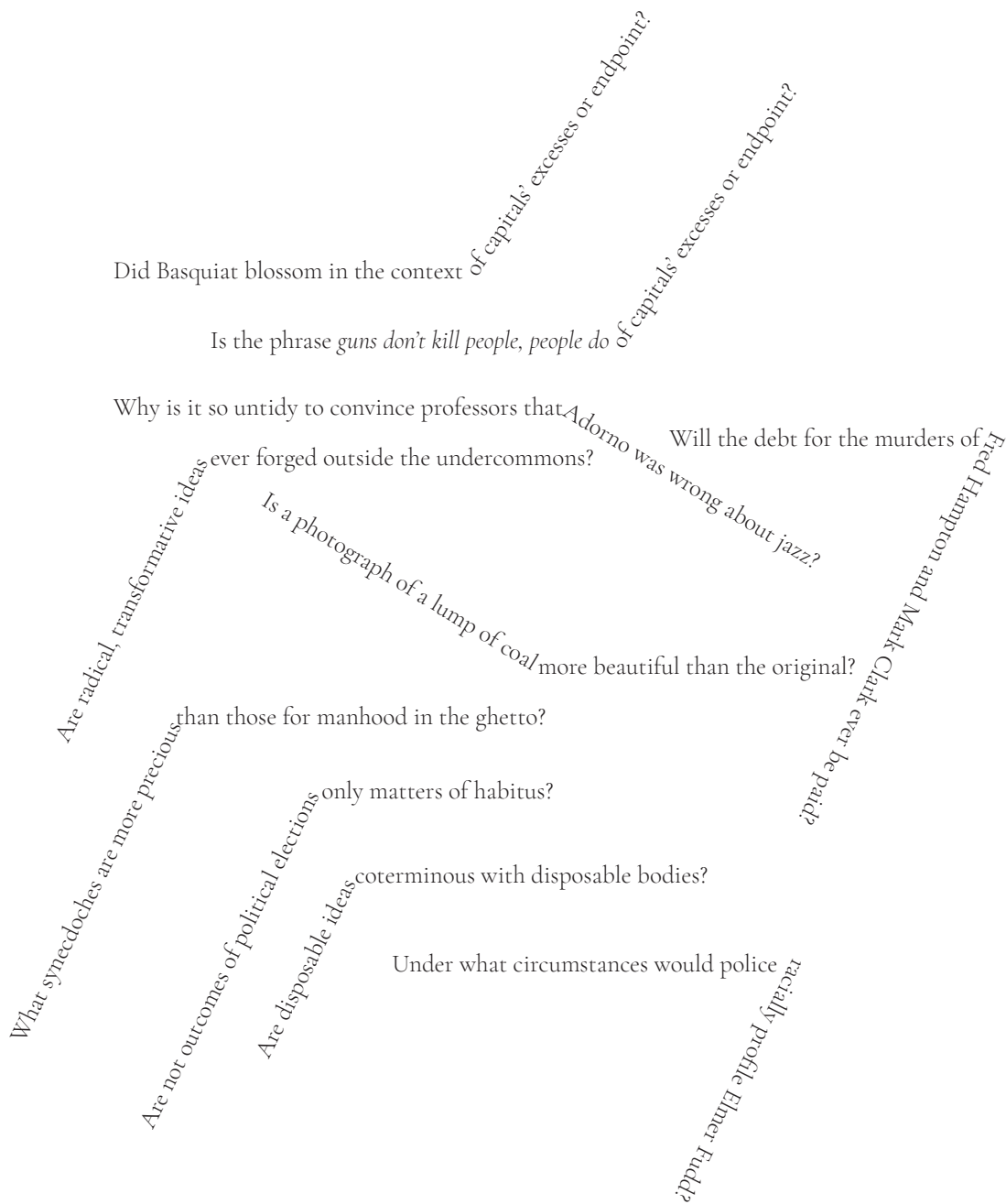
I got bean soup. There were carrels
where I could plug in my laptop.
I wrote about the moment my maiden,
transformed into an ogre,
puts on perfume.

Dr. Adelman, the second opinion,
pronounces his name Addle-man.
He doesn't promise that David can walk the sixty miles home.
He's optimistic, though.
Fool me twice, shame on another doctor.

He proposes an endarterectomy,
which is iambic trimeter.
David has a test, an MRA, which is an anapest
or, depending on how you say it, a molossus,
like a spondee, but three stressed syllables
in his foot. The blockage in the other leg
is a rock. The iambic operation won't work.
Addle-man says David should walk into pain,
through pain,
just walk to get better. David smoked Camels,
and they're good walkers.
On the train home, he wears his airport face.

10 Questions

Renoir Gaither



Cardinals

Rae Gouirand

The cardinals dart up to take seed
from the pile my dad's just put out,

the handful he'd gone in slippers
to shake onto the brick sill. With my feet

on the couch cushions, I can just
rest my chin on the windowframe,

my front stretched over radiator heat.
These mornings I watch the birds

until they are done, until they've
eaten it all or begun to fight the rest.

Each peck acute. Each one the first
red thing, meant. There is new snow

too scattered across the porch, a line
made jagged and accurate in wind.

Trash Night

Rae Gouirand

We don't always have to imagine new habits—
sometimes, we can just find them,

save imagination for consequences, for sex.
In so many houses this summer

I haul the bins out, listen to the trash water
splash, sort glass from newspaper

before washing hands. When friends cook steak
eat the entire thing as offered:

back in the land where it never rains
these rare things take me to the corner

on my bones. One thought is stuck
like that pasta we sucked. It all ended up

in the same place—we all grew up
to be trash haulers

to need things we'd wear out. I could
stutter *corn, corn, corn, storm*

to remind myself where I am walking
but someone calls out—something I forgot.

This

Rae Gouirand

I have thought long on what we might say
for the best of endings—

rarely can I make sense of where I've been
despite the eye I've paid.

I have been fooled, held my breath
because I want it. To be close

enough. I know not to try a life
by speech. I wouldn't call this secret

even if my gut guards it.
Even if I am guard.

I'm not sure I trust places, things,
the sense of ground under

my feet both real and impossible, but
the skirt I call this catches

what I pass. For
miles. I carry the tears because

they are the hem, because there is
no hem, because there are no shoes

between me and the line.
Once you see yourself inseparable

only that.
I want to tell another where the skirt

begins and ends. I need to end it.
I have not said this yet. This is a start.

The Problem with Tinder

Brianna Albers

is I never know what word to use. I mean, I'm disabled, but not in the way you're thinking, and yes, I can have sex, but just because I can doesn't mean I want to. I match with someone for the first time and my body seizes, like a ghost stepped through me. Hands, decapitated. Empty spaces, if you know where to look. In any case, I'm remembering yesterday's loss. It was easier, then, but maybe that's because— Can you imagine? Me, somehow unafraid. There was the boy who saw death in me: stark, unmistakable. A raincloud, or maybe it was a hammer. Both a threatened drop. Then there was the boy who saw death in himself. I kill him in a dream and, eventually, he forgives me. Or I forgive him. Or neither of us is forgiven, because neither of us owns a gun. And, somewhere in the middle, the boy who would've asked me out. I didn't love him. I loved the others, but I didn't love him, so the conclusion I've come to is one of difficulty. I love(d) the violences, which explains— Is there a word, you think? For this? For betrayal, of the body. But even that feels disingenuous. There is no language for this kind of absence. Loss, maybe, but even that takes years to learn, and it's not as sharp as that. I have not lost a limb. If anything, I have lost a life, and gained something in its stead. The air unformed. A negation, left wanting—

Thanksgiving

Brianna Albers

again. **Cousin #2** has locked herself in the guest bedroom—a scurrying sob; a spider, legs snapped. **Cousin #1** and **Boyfriend #1** sit on the couch, his hand on her thigh, pinching fat & muscle, a quiet tenderizing. It strikes something, a place inside me. The mallet is always loaded. And the prize? What prize? Do you really think I want this longing? My grandmother, perched in my father's chair, legs swinging. She asks **Boyfriend #1** what he does. Something about fitness training. The conversation unfurls. I think how, days ago, **Possibility #3** said something about **Ex #1**, how I could not breathe for the next hour & a half. How, three months from now, I will ask **Possibility #3** if he still has feelings for **Ex #1**. He says *no, of course not, you know who I have feelings for*. The closest thing to a confirmation, but still a near-miss—fingers plucking taut strings, arrow flying wide. How, six months from now, he denies me. How, six months from now, I refuse the fork; I'm never as hungry as I used to be. But this moment. This moment, gouged through. The room spins, never as violent as it is in dreams. I think how, a year from now, **Boyfriend #3** could be sitting next to **Cousin #3**, his hand on her thigh, pinching fat & muscle. Mostly fat. *How did the two of you meet? / Online*, and **Boyfriend #3** will laugh. *Remember how you told me I sounded like Smaug? That was the first thing you ever said to me. / Well, your voice is really deep. / You are so bad at flirting*. But no. **Cousin #1** shifts, hand upturned. Supplication. Silently, I mirror the gesture. Down the hall, **Cousin #2**, clutching her stomach. The somatism of grief. My grandmother finds me, a hunch of a girl, lost in would-bes. And I hear it. A quiet jangling, like something from a dream. *And what about you? Any boys in your life?* But instead: *How's school going?* This was supposed to be my year. And again, my skin: new, untouched, at 19 years old—

Utah Comes Back

Jeffrey Tucker

This, then: your revenge,
a warm day beginning to crack. Never mind the sun
blushing the green river to blood,
bricks on the Union Building flaring in the new humidity
before the band takes center stage on the levy.
Something will give. The ice cream in my hand
will stop its drip, then harden. Dew streams
running downtown windows will slow to frost.
See? The entire river is nothing but mirage,
a hocus pocus abracadabra mockup malaise
raising blank hope down Court Street.
Army cargo planes will drop and shatter,
olive icicles all.

Poem for My Sons When They Pray

Jacob Stratman

I hand feed my fire-eel, she said, another
dinner-guest like me, over chicken and wine,
pasta and warm, homemade bread.
To shake my head would have been rude, I know,
to ask her what the hell she was talking about
would have been typical for me. Expected. Revealing
my ignorance and confusion so readily. So I stared
at the salt-water tank, just over
and beyond her left shoulder, hoping for a clue—
for the image to appear, there among the little blue
nameless fish and the pink, speckled, plastic
rocks. Nothing. I spoke, with the growing excitement
of one who hears a foreign tongue for the first time
or the new believer trying to mouth along
with the other congregants as they recite
the Apostle's Creed or the Lord's Prayer, to the woman
next to me: "Never have I heard that sentence before."
There was no one or no thing in that farmhouse
in the Northeast corner of Oklahoma to help me:
not the woman's face. Not her hand
gestures while she described the process. Not the
fish tank behind her. Only this:
something I remembered and had to retrieve
from Lucy Greely: "Language supplies us
with ways to express ever subtler levels
of meaning, but does that imply that language
gives meaning, or robs us of it when we
are at a loss to name things?" Now, I have started
to notice young men and women hold their hands
out, elbows still touching their hips, with palms
empty, facing up, while they pray. While they search
for (or are witness to) meaning. When the woman
Googled "fire eel" and passed her phone
around the table so that we could all see and believe,
I knew, then, with my hands slightly
open, facing up, though hidden on my lap, one hand
now holding the phone with the picture
of a "fire eel" now true but awful that God
could not exist at this table.

The Sunday Comics

Rosalind Kaliden

The toddler wanders
into a patchy grassed picnic grove.
He scoops a fistful of gravel.
His chubby hand smashes
moonstones in his mouth.
Arms spread like wings and he gags.
Lime green double popsicles
melt into paper wrappers.
I search the thin crowd for the caretaker.
White popcorn, no butter, in bags
and strewn over the ground.
Who's in charge of the little guy?
I grab an arm and curl it around my leg.
I dig the peat out of his mouth.
A woman shouts,
You let him do it!
He spits
and flutters his hands.

3-Year-Old Female Pit Mix Seeks Foster Heart Open to the Possibility of Forever

Merissa Cope

I.

I have never put my heart
in an animal before;
the hamster was just practice
/a microcosm for empathy
and the cats were not really mine.

I have never loved so hard with the worry
that she didn't know.
They all know, perhaps this is the problem.
She is tender, and too heavy
a hand/heart will send her back
inside herself, back into her own eyes.

II.

She stepped on a wasp today
I could feel the sting in my left ventricle.
She is a proud lady
her trust is lagoonal: easy
to wade in, but shallow.
She managed to shove the entire back
half of her body away from me
for the better part of an afternoon.

III.

I wonder if she knows my butterflied ribs,
if I know myself.
Does she see me shove my whole
chest away from anyone who dares prod
my sores? Or does she await the opportunity
to lick the salt deposits off my face?

IV.

Things I have said to her when no one is around:
Pay attention to where you're going.
It's official, you're mine/have been mine.
You're my ride or die now.

V.
She is tough
like her mama tries to be
so she went on the next walk without limping
but avoided that spot on the path.

10:30 am

Merissa Cope

Spelling "I love you"
On the Keyboard of My Phone

Rotten

Rank outreach echo sign

etc. rest rhythm

Rewriting and Adding

Your rotten echo outreach
sign, etc.

Rest the rhythm.

Post the rank.

Rewriting II

Your rotten echo
does not bounce
like it used to.
It sits there in the cavern,
mocking you.

Reach out to the rhythm,
to the Great Sign
You Have Been Longing For
etc.

Lay in bed for hours
ranking your past
lovers.

There is no rest here

120 mph

Merissa Cope

Last night you came, sweet apparition you
held me to trembling chest in that blue shirt
with the white dots, manufactured goose
bumps.

You, tender vertebrae of the poem

before yesterday and the one before
and before that, standing in the water
fall downpouring around you, stream-lined
chest.

There is a ring of pores on my nipples

that matches your shirt. Raised white and
nervous

my whole body salutes you when you pass
it is like a migration I go where

I am pulled. We know the truth watery

ghost, instead I dream of driving fast and
police sirens, wake up gasping for air.

Singing Dogs

Ian Pisarcik

We live in isolated mountain forest
And travel steep terrain
We speak in whale
song Inveterate
howlers
We are not wolves or jackals
Dingo's or African wild dogs
There has been movement
And so too we move
Up the highlands
Further out of range
From where once we brought fire and language
And were called spirits of the dead

Visions of an Aging Poet

Samantha Le

Late morning in History Park where you once walked
upright. You smell of suspicions.
Chalk-dust moustache. Wooden desk
imprints on left elbow patch.

Poet Father, where have you been?
Your face floats above the scavenging crowd.
We, violent baby birds, peck at ourselves,
seeking refuge on the ground. The sky, a blank sheet.
(Loneliness was in the falling.)

At the podium, you sprout beak without heart.
Face chapped
with unwritten lines. Desperate
for love, you chase away the audience.
Whose lives are blurred by the stories you tell?

Being you is black.
Black slacks, shoes and socks; smoky breaths; velvet tongue.
Black ink pen leaking black words
inside shadowy pockets. Plucked to the bones,

scratching out squawks
of heartbreaks. Your ego develops asthma to cope
with the thawing from exposure to flight.

Erotophobia

Domenic Scopa

– age 15, eight years after the rape

The slam of the screen door,
such a sullen finality–
Tell me, how can I calm
the static field of my awake and trembling skin?
I want to be forgiven with an explanation,
with some measurable fact.
In other words: This is why it happened.
And yes: This is how I've felt for years.
And, of course, I'd like to steal back the past.
Maybe I'll convince myself I can...
But what could I do with it,
except what I did?
If I escape to Prague, again,
will the anonymity of foreign language soothe me,
the husky, Slavic consonants like Novocain injected
before the dentist drills, exchanging minor pain
to numb the possibility of greater pain?
This finality, the weight
of the screen door as it slams–
Why shouldn't it hurt?
Maybe it will pass,
like morning dew and sunshine...
But whatever's wiped away will surely return.
Perhaps I'll find some necessary task,
replacing the record player's needle,
or fixing the mailbox that leans to one side,
some task that seems impossible right now.
La vie belle, la vie belle–
Don't think about it:
The science of black holes is easier to explain.

try to talk about birds and the weather but my voice wavers. She knows what I'm doing. She grins. Says, "Let's go naked dancing." It has started to rain. We get out of the bath and run outside and dance naked as the rain pours in sheets around us. She pulls me into her and we press our sour mouths together. A campus policeman walks by and we scream and run inside. It rains for four days and we take twenty baths and during the nineteenth one she slides her hand under the water and into my crotch, presses her fingers over my flesh like she's playing piano. I shake. She grins. Says, "How's the boyfriend?" I pretend not to hear. I never actually had a boyfriend, but she thinks I do and that is enough.

3.

One of the girls who Kitty sometimes disappears with tells us there is a ghost in the bathroom. She says that the ghost was a girl who slit her wrists in the tub after something happened with a hockey team on our dorm floor. Kitty makes me come to the liquor store to buy candles and a bottle of wine. When the man behind the counter asks if she's twenty-one, she snarls at him and hooks the collar of his shirt with her middle finger, pulls him forward. He hands her the bottle and winks, starts walking toward us. We run away laughing. At the dorm bathroom we put the candles in a circle around the tub and light them. Then we draw the bath, pour in half the bottle of wine and drink the rest. She moves toward me and the water sloshes out of the sides and the candles hiss as they extinguish. She grins. She puts her tongue in my mouth and I say: "bite." She does. She pulls me on top of her and then it is us entwined and the cheap candle smell that reminds me of grandmothers going to church. She takes a deep breath and then pushes her head between my legs. The water bubbles as she exhales then she licks at me. She pushes her head up, takes another breath. I see something shiny then, some green light is seeping out of the candles and something flickers inside of me and I scream.

4.

You were a girl. You were good. Not that it matters, but you were. You went to brush your teeth in Section B of your dorm room, your father was a dentist and you were afraid of cavities so you always brushed extra hard, hard enough to make your gums bleed. Enough that when you spit out your toothpaste it came out red. Three boys came in. They ripped you up. They left you on the floor. You thought you were going to have a child. You opened up your veins one month later and stained the tiles. The college called it a shaving accident. You are here and you are so beautiful that it makes everything hurt. We are covered in blood that is not ours. We are bad girls we are dead we are dying and something is burning us up. We are in the bath we are close. We are coming. But you are gone.

5.

We wake up. Kitty's face is red. Everything is red. There is a paper towel on fire. The bath is cold. There is a shadow the shape of a woman on the floor. I look down. There is

a razor blade stuck in your chest and my fingers are on fire. I put them in the bath and watch the fire go out. There is a razor. It gouged your thighs and somehow it cut a small chunk of flesh out of your chest that now looks like a shark bite, like someone thought you were a piece of too soft fruit.

6.

I scream and no one comes. Then, a girl I have never seen. She turns red too, and I think that red is the dying color. She is scared. I tell her to go get a doctor. The ambulance comes and they lift us out of the bath. The emergency room doctor bandages my fingers and asks if we are sisters. I say yes. Sometimes it is easier. He raises an eyebrow, "Bathing together?" "Yes. We are close." In the hospital I drink orange juice while they pump blood and other vital things into your crumpled body. I think of great lovers and try to make a list of them. I think of all the places you have been bitten, this is by far the worst. I think about your tongue. I think that what I want more than anything is to be able to look at your tongue and its perfect sandpaper pink roughness.

7.

They say I can come in now. You are on the bed and you smile at me. "I told you about the ghosts." I don't laugh. I open your mouth and look at your tongue. It is perfect. I touch it and the doctor makes upset noises. You have five tubes inside of your arms and a bandage wrapped around your chest. I go to the hospital store and buy a box of salt and try to eat it all. I can't. I throw up into the hospital's toilet and the salt scratches my mouth. I think I should probably stay away from bathrooms. I throw up again. In the mirror my eyes are not my own and the salty bile on the corners of my lips looks like sand. I wish I was a beach or a human ocean.

8.

I watch you sleep. You are beautiful. I call your mother. I tell her it was a freak accident. I don't tell her about the ghosts or the baths or the bruises on your back and the way that you ran your teeth over my belly. She says that she will come when she gets a chance. I know she won't get a chance. She has a pimply boy bring a bouquet of sickly yellow roses. I crumple the roses into the wastebasket. I buy you a bottle of Pepsi and you drink it in three gulps, squirt the rest of it into my lap and make dolphin noises.

Your hospital gown looks like a ghost costume. I wince. I hold your hand. You sleep. I see the girl and her torn open body and the stuff that stained her thighs after: red and white and flesh mixed together always looks fake. The boys were never found. They were golden in the tinny light of the bathroom and for a second she thought that they were angels. She clutched her chest and expected to see a bullet or some other wound but there wasn't any until they pushed her onto the floor then, after, into the tub.

9.

I wink at the nurse doing the night rounds because I don't know what else to do. I am too good at this, by now. She smiles and hands me an extra cup of apple sauce. I spoon it into your mouth. You hold my hand. You are like a planet.

10.

You are dying. You are dying and you are beautiful. You take my hand and put my thumb in your mouth and try to hiss like you are extinguishing a fire. You sit up. You are not dying. You leave the hospital tomorrow but will always have a mark just underneath your collarbone. You say it's like you were too delicious and had to be bitten. I try to say sorry but nothing comes out. In the morning we walk to the wine store and sit on the curb outside of it. You lick my ear and I touch your bandages. You buy two bottles. We drink them until everything is fuzzy and grey. You rub three fingers over my right thigh and ask if I want to try to get some milkshakes for free. I say yes. The light is turning our skin pink and the sky is shot through with clouds that are really veins.

One More

Nicholas Russell

One more stop and then we can go home.

The time between him pushing hair out of my face and me watching my feet dangle over the edge of the back seat blurs until night comes and my shoes appear in orange flashes. He's singing Hotel California quietly, tapping his fingers more than anything. My dress is flared around my hips, an odd color washed out under the strobe light of passing street lamps. I'm 12. He turns to me saying he'll take the cuffs off once we stop for gas.

One more stop and then we can go home.

It's bright out, he's cracked the windows to let the humidity out after sleeping in the car. He told me he doesn't snore but that was a lie; it sounded like a washing machine muffled through a wall. It's hard sleeping with your hands behind your back. I told him this and he stared at me in the rear view mirror, waiting to see if I was trying to hide something. I just looked at him, yawning until my eyes watered. He finally turned in his seat and told me if I ran away, it would take longer to get back. I nod and he tells me to turn around so he can unlock the cuffs.

Do you need a friend?

The hum of the car has become white noise to me when he asks. My fingers have grease from fast food and my stomach is moving inside me, pushing gas around, talking to itself. My shoes are on the ground, my jacket too. He asked me why I was playing in the street, wearing a dress, if I was a little boy. I told him I wasn't a little boy, my hair was just short. He looked at me, dipping his head, one hand on my shoulder, searching for something in my eyes. He repeats his question, do I need a friend? Well, what does he mean, I ask. He says he can get me a friend if I want. I can pick them out and everything. I'm 13 and I say yes I would like a friend.

One more stop and then you can go home.

This time he doesn't say it to me but to Tommy. Tommy is loud, he's blonde and fat, he won't stop crying. I offer him my drink and he turns away. I don't blame him, watered-down root beer isn't very nice in the summer and all my ice cubes have melted. We're on a wide road that turns to the right forever.

I wake up and Tommy is staring at me, eventually pointing at my wrists. I tell him they don't hurt anymore. The cuffs have become an accessory more than anything. We can't stop for fast food because Tommy keeps screaming, trying to run away. So we don't eat and I'm starting to think Tommy is really selfish. I picked a bad friend but he tells me that's what happens sometimes.

In a town called Vallejo, we drop Tommy off and let him run far. His shoes kick

up dust in the night, his limbs too long because he's like me and we're growing too fast for our bodies to deal with. I ask if I'm allowed to pick a different friend and he says maybe later.

One more stop then we can go home.

He's started to give me books. They're yellow paperbacks, very cheap, very worn. I like them but I can only read them during the day and that becomes a problem when I take too many naps. He left me alone in the car the other day; that's never happened before. He even took off my cuffs. It was nighttime, in a parking lot for a grocery store. The windows were foggy and it had just rained. He puts his hands in his jacket and walked away from the store into the trees.

One more stop then we can go home.

I start asking him questions. He says he's from Canada, up north. We get gas and he tells me to pick out something for us to drink from the glass refrigerators inside. He takes the cuffs off and pulls out a cigarette and I run inside because I hate the smell when he smokes. The clerk doesn't look up as the door dings. My dress is in a trashcan somewhere in a town called Reno. Gas stations make me think of it because a clerk stopped me once, asking if I was okay. I nodded, curtsied, told him it was my favorite dress. When I got back in the car, he said we might have to get rid of it because too many people were murmuring about the dress being too small. I remember him saying that word, "murmuring" and asking what it meant. He said it's exactly what it sounds like. I pick out two tall cans of lemonade and iced tea. I show him through the store window and he holds a finger up to wait. I walk up aisles amongst brightly-colored bags of this and that. The bell rings and he takes the cans from me. He's about to pay when I spot a bag of cookies I haven't seen in a few months. I don't ask him, I just throw them on the counter and he nods at the clerk.

One more stop then we go home.

It's taken me a while to notice that he's saying it differently. Words are missing although I can't tell which ones. I start to get curious about his phrasing. *We*. As if he can't do it either. Like we're in this together. He says it every time we get back in the car. Maybe he means after the next stop, we'll be able to make our way home. I ask him if he remembers where I'm from and he says yes. I say good because I don't.

Want to see something cool?

He whispers it because he isn't sure if I'm awake but I am. It's green where we are and there's only a two-lane road. I wonder if he asks me questions when I'm asleep, things that would tell me more about what he's thinking. We get out of the car, parked on the side

in gravel surrounded by trees. There's a post made of wood with wires on top that stretch into the distance in both directions. On it is a piece of paper with my name on it and an old photo. It says "HAVE YOU SEEN THIS CHILD" with more information at the bottom. My hair color, wrong. My height, wrong. My age is the only thing right. He stands next to me while I squint at the pixels on my picture. Black and white, smiling, a flash overexposing my cheeks, my teeth. I can tell he's looking down the road, checking for cars. It's quiet though. A quiet with some semblance of personal space. I tell him it is cool and ask if I can sit up front.

He doesn't say no, which isn't a yes.

One more stop then home.

His joints are starting to crack more which is weird because he still looks young. Maybe it's from the smoking. Or from all the sitting. He never takes his jacket off. He has pit stains, which means it's an old jacket. I don't like looking at his face. It makes me feel homesick and it's something I don't appreciate. Sometimes he smiles and I think about his skull underneath, how it's always smiling. Like it's waiting for the skin on top to catch up. I tell him I don't think my skull smiles like everyone else's. He agrees then asks me if I want to learn to drive.

One more stop then home.

It's a stick shift, he says. I don't know what that means but I listen. Eventually, I end up driving because he's getting tired more and more. I ask him where I'm supposed to go and he says anywhere before putting the seat back and folding his arms. I drive without the radio. He says it freaks him out. But whatever, he says. Sometimes our roles reverse. He gets drinks, I get gas, he stays in the car, I walk away. Some of his hairs are white. Not too many. But they weren't there before.

One more stop.

I tell him I wore a dress because it was all they had at the place he told me was a juvenile detention center. I told him they let me pick from a large trashcan full of other people's clothes. I picked the dress because I liked the idea of not having anything between my legs. He asks if I'm a boy or a girl. I say, good question, does it matter? He says, no. I don't tell him that I came towards the car because he looked friendly; it's not true. He thinks it is and I don't know why. He said, do you want me to take you home and I nodded. But all I really heard was, take me. Yes. Take me away from here.

One more stop.

We get in the car and put our drinks in the cup holder. I get a salad this time but he gets his burger and fries. Another summer. And still that jacket.

I say it when we get in the car because he forgets to. He just laughs and I understand because it's funny. I don't remember how old I am. It doesn't worry me. A lot of things don't worry me anymore.

contributors

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