



Neon

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Objects In The Gas

Lara S. Williams

It was a Monday when my mother asphyxiated herself in our 1988 Camero, locked behind the electric garage doors that never worked when it frosted. She had three things with her: a banana skin, her wedding veil and my dad's wristwatch. She had pulled the pin at exactly three thirty to offer us the comfort of a time of death. I thought it a sad thing to do.

She hooked the hose up crookedly. When she was found it hung lazy-tongued from the exhaust. She must have suffered for minutes longer than she had to. Long minutes in that dark room, the shelves stacked with paint that had never been used, machinery that never worked.

My father had intervened in the scene of her death to skin and lacquer it. He didn't remove the banana, innocent as it was on the seat beside her. She often wore his watch and so that too he left. He hid the veil, washed the towels and took the hose to the tip. He scrubbed away every piece of her decision and when I got home from school I was greeted by an ambulance and an accident. My mother, on a cold day, started the car for warmth and sat too long in the sealed garage. Dad, in the shower to prepare for golf, unaware until he retrieved his clubs.

The Banana

My mother and I bought the bunch at ASDA and we argued over lady's fingers or plantains. Her teeth were weak with fillings and she insisted on buying small, overripe fruits. We compromised and bought both.

Since inheriting her aunt's chest freezer she had become obsessed with meat.

"I bought steaks a few days ago but we're out of ham. I could get sausages, does your dad still eat sausage? Isn't it terrible, I don't even remember. He made kebabs at the last barbecue. Kebabs. Honey, I think. He eats pork but he didn't like the last roast I did. Was it burnt? He wouldn't like it if it was burnt"

"Mum?"

"No you're right, I'll do a beef roast. Pork is fatty. Maybe I'll go to Trish's butcher, they do rabbit. Rabbit has no fat. Tastes like chicken, apparently. Do you like rabbit? It's expensive so if your dad doesn't like it I'll waste a lot of money. Do you think he'd like rabbit?"

"What's wrong with you? Just buy whatever."

She tilted her head to the side and stared at me. "I'll get beef."

As she filled the car I watched the flesh above her elbow fold into a sullen moon.

The house was empty when we got back.

"Your father's out."

I carried the shopping, three bags in each hand, and nodded to a post-it on the freezer. "Gone for a drink with an old work friend." I dropped the bags and handed her the note.

She turned it over in her hands.

Wedding Veil

She had always wanted to marry in the summer but her belly started showing late June and her mother threatened to withdraw her inheritance if she waited any longer. Dad had shown no interest in marrying her and it took my grandfather's promise of financial aid and premium real estate to sway him.

Nothing about the wedding was what she wanted. They were joined in a registry office at the insistence of a family who would not see her marry religiously. The celebrant organised carnations to be placed at the end of each aisle and my mother cried when she saw them. They were yellow and dry, petals on the red-swirl carpet like paper from a hole punch.

She dressed in a cream suit jacket and skirt with enough pleats at the waist to hide her shame. For something borrowed, her mother lent her a leather tissue case.

"Why are you crying? You got yourself into this mess, this is the best way out. Jim is a good catch. You'll never have to work."

"He doesn't love me."

"Oh, don't be stupid." Her mother went to the door and peeked out at the guests hovering over their seats. "He's marrying you, isn't he? A lot of men would have done a runner. Left you for us to deal with."

She pulled at the ruffles on her skirt, earning a slap to the wrist.

The Watch

She gave him a Casio watch for his fortieth birthday. It never touched his wrist.



Image by Pam Roth

Two Poems

Emily Darrell

My Days As An Animal

More than anything I'd like to remember
my days as an animal--
just something to get me through traffic
and taxes, feeling too old, or fat,
or bad at foreign languages.
One little memory could go so far--
like a night alone on the forest floor,
where I slept on a bed of dry needles;
where I breathed in the cold smell of dirt;
where I wanted for nothing,
not pillow, nor blanket, nor company;
where I did not feel lonely or frightened;
where I dreamt only of a swift-flowing river
jumping with fish
and when I woke
it was there.

Everything Is A Percussion Instrument

The kids are loud
only for the sake
of being loud.
They don't care for nothing.
After they get tired of hitting and banging
and slamming around

on everything in the house
they go and grope each other
on the front lawn.
What do they care
who sees?
They order a pizza
but don't have money
to pay for it.
I have to pay and
they don't even eat the pizza
but throw it on each other,
stick the pepperoni to their
nipples, take their shirts off
and dance around on the front lawn
where anybody who cares to
can see.
If an angel from heaven brought
them a harp to play
they'd play that harp
like it was a percussion
instrument. They'd slap the angel's face
just to see what sound it made.
There's nothing the kids
won't set fire to
just to see how it burns.
They don't know yet
that it don't matter--
that in the end
you don't get nothing
but ashes.



Image by Miguel Saavedra

Three Poems

Tyler Bigney

Pineapples

I had just turned twenty-three
and was at the crucial turning point
in ones life, where I wanted to get out
of the constraints of my small town
and do something. Something spectacular.

I bought a plane ticket to Moscow
after meeting a girl on the internet.
We talked and made believe that we were
in love and that we had everything in common
and that distance was just a made-up word
for weaklings.

I hadn't had sex in months. Five months.
She straddled on top of me the minute
we got back to her apartment. I remember
sticking my index fingers down
her rainbow-coloured socks, the soft skin
of her ankles, and the fact that
her nipples tasted like pineapples.

I stayed for three weeks.

We didn't talk about babies or diapers
or marriage or bills or buying a car.
We didn't talk about money or politics

or family or friends or Soviet history.

When I'm falling up the stairs
or paying bills or stubbing my toe
on the part of floor that lifts up
and catches my foot,
I think back to her, and Russia
and when I was twenty-three and lived
without a worry in the world,
saw life through rose-coloured glasses,
drank till sunrise,
slept till sunset
and fucked as if
I'd never get fucked again.



Image by Ryan Smart

In Search Of Moscow

I slept in a field in rural Ukraine
under a pale sky, without a star.
I kept crawling in and out
of my tent, smoking cigarettes
and dreaming of the slab of sky
and the stars that hung down over
Moscow. I could see Moscow if I
squinted. It was cold, early
November, and I was warmed by
a wool sweater, and a belly
full of vodka.

The next morning, I was shaken
by three men wearing
police uniforms and those little hats
that they wear.

"What you do here?"

Good morning, no. No such thing.

"Visa. You visa?"

"Here's visa. I'll go."

I gathered up my things, rolled up my tent,
slung it across my back and walked
in the direction of where I hoped the nearest
road lay--a place to stretch my legs
stick out my thumb, and squint my eyes
in search of Moscow.

Things I Sometimes Think About When Travelling By Plane

Blowing through clouds, I want to see the desert sun they talk so much about in movies. The ocean looks bigger, thirty-thousand feet high.

Shaken by turbulence, I wonder what people thought of when the plane was going down. Did strangers fall in love? Did they stand up to shout out their secrets or did they sit leaned over, patiently waiting? Home a word they suddenly couldn't pronounce.

Three Poems

A.K. Jackson



Image by Frances Magee

Silencer

He put a tube in her mouth like a cork
to silence her. Down the hall, it only
sounded like a little pop each time he murdered her.
Trigger, hammer, bullet and like magic
no sound came out.

She took it out one night, her child hands
grappling with his deadliness, and her parents
watched her light up like white phosphorus.
In fear, they put the plug back in. They
stoppered their own child, who was exploding
inside.

After years, when it was time for her and me

it was like breaking down a door. I was unarmed
against whatever was inside. We loved each other.
She was filled with shrapnel. Bomb struck.
Unsilenced, we heard ten-year-old blasts,
like stars long extinguished. I still feel them
burning.

Minimalism

Some days were quiet with dead time.
I put my legs on the wall and let the blood
drain out of them, then tried to stand. Nothing
was filled to the brim with nothing. My mind
hummed with quiet between the action.
Between each bruise came five hours of stillness.
La Vita Nuova and a few sweet crackers.
My body was a ghost town, abandoned bones
where I used to live. My head was a movie camera.
I studied the room upside down or sideways
panning from the neck, blinking the cut,
closing my eyes and crawling to my next shot.
Isolation could be a nice word. No one there but me,
there was a theory to everything I was doing,
names for the games I played:
Waiting, coughing, breathing. Incubation.

Bones II

Years ago there had been a hanging,
No one we knew, but his face was dead
with possibility. So many of us:
a young person with hands tied,
limp and dangling.
The boy is still dead, will always be dead
but you only remember our fight.
Newspaper smeared with jam, hands sticky
with sweat and anger,
mouth moving quick and unsure.
I told you that you were wrong.
It is still fresh as pitch in your mind--
a wet trap. *It isn't our problem but it matters.*
In my mind I can make you know that you are a neck.
A few supports: thin scaffolding. You
love to be alive and able to move.
The breeze will always carry that corpse for me.
Feet finished with foot business just inches
from where they belong.
I wonder what it really means to hate
someone. To hate the neck of the thing.
The most precious bones.

Third Party, Fire & Theft

Dan Powell

The car burns as I sleep fully reclined in the driver's seat. The acrid plastic smoke wakes me. The smell of burning dolls.

A crowd clatters out from the cliff top café next to the tourist car park, the cook banging a thick fist on the driver side window. The smoke curls its heavy weather system about my head as he points a frantic finger at the unlock button in the driver side armrest.

I jab the button with the white lock symbol and nothing happens. Nothing happens. Nothing happens.

The driver side window pelts me with artificial hail. Two hands find me, scrunch me up in my jacket and yank me through the hole where the window used to be.

The cook props me against the pay and display machine, sits with me to wait for the emergency services. We watch the fire spread across the car. The heat blows the remaining glass and the fire stretches out from the windows to claw the sky, smoke thick as blood trailing into the air from its fingertips.

A whole cutback-proposal's-worth of emergency service professionals tell me I am lucky to be alive. Multiple firemen. Two paramedics. Three police officers, one of them a woman who holds my hand like my mother used to.

I relax against the pay and display machine and watch as the firemen hose the car back under control, its blackened frame fizzing and popping like a broken soda stream as the water hits.

The policewoman is first to ask the question. We're going over how the fire started and both acknowledge that I might have died. She crouches down in front of me, her face filled with the distance of someone waiting to say what they are thinking rather than listening to what is being said.

"Let's go back to before the fire started," she says. "What were you doing sleeping in the car?"

I can't help thinking the answer is in the question.

In the hospital the orderly wheeling me to the ward talks about a car he owned once, the windscreen of which repeatedly and spontaneously shattered. He blamed local youths with their ASBOs and hooded jumpers, until it happened again as he walked across the hospital car park toward the car. He tells me the glass buckled and flexed, as if squeezed by some invisible giant fist, before shattering onto the front seats.

I spend the afternoon waiting for a doctor to discharge me, hooked up to an oxygen mask, breathing air that smells like the inside of blister packaging. The TV bolted to the wall near the ceiling plays property programmes at an inaudible volume. A lesbian couple is being shown round a series of houses for sale, each one more expensive than the last.

A middle-aged woman sleeps in the bed beside me, hooked to a drip that beeps in alarm every so often. Each time a nurse scurries in with a different-sized, different-coloured plastic sack of fluid to string from the stand.

"The doctor will be with you soon," the nurse says each time she exits past my bed, folding the empty fluid bag like a crisp packet.

The forms start with my being discharged. The doctor says my exposure to the smoke was minimal. There is no need for further observation. My disappointment at hearing this tastes the same as that which hit me when overlooked for a role in the school play as a child.

I walk back to the car park on the cliff and stare at the scorch marks on the tarmac. Cars park either side once more but no driver braves placing their car over the burnt space. I wait and watch two or three cars approach, the drivers considering the gap, rolling down their windows for a closer look at the burn marks before continuing the hundred yards or so down the road to the next short stay car park.

I fish my phone from my pocket and take photos of the empty space.

Police reports and insurance forms describe the fire as fully engaged. The policewoman and the claims adjustor repeat the phrase in their questions. The newspapers prefer words like blaze and conflagration and, in one particularly striking headline, inferno.

I write down my version in the clearest language I can, squeezing events into the box frames and pre-drawn lines of the various forms. I stick to a clear past tense and words that generate the least amount of ambiguity when placed together. The process reminds me of writing a "What I did on my holidays" composition for the start of school term.

The claims adjustor calls round to clear up a few details. She wears a trouser suit and clicks her silver ballpoint in and out three times before writing anything on her forms. I sign my name with her pen, clicking it in and out to steady myself.

At the door, she says, "We'll be in touch if we have any further questions."

She returns later that week.

"It seems there is some irregularity in how the fire started," she says, clicking the pen in and out before ticking something off the list on her lap. "It seems the police and fire forensic teams have been unable to ascertain the cause of the fire."

I watch the ballpoint of the pen, a tiny smudge of black ink squatting on the silver head, flick in and out three times. She crosses through something on her list.

"Could you tell me what you remember?"

"I was sleeping."

"Why was that?"

"I was tired."

"Do you often sleep in cars parked on cliff top car parks?"

"Only my own."

The cheek of my response tastes of strawberries.

"You will understand that we simply cannot authorise a claim on your policy if there is any question of irregularities in the events surrounding the fire."

"I will, yes," I say, enjoying myself.

She shuffles her papers together. "We'll be in touch," she says.

I miss out a lot of incidental details when filling in the spaces of the claim forms, some true and some not so. If I list them, which is which should become clear.

Before I fell asleep there was someone else in the car with me. Had the passenger seat not burned along with the rest of the car a faint indentation in the upholstery may well have been visible to the trained eye of the forensic investigators.

I dreamt of fire while I slept. A circle of fire around which a camp had been struck. Trees shielded the clearing from the wind and music played from somewhere above. I sat alone, looking up at the stars, each one a furnace reduced to a pin-prick in the dark fabric of the sky. Then the smell and sound and reality of the burning car yanked me awake.

My older brother gave me the car. He handed me the keys before leaving for his new job. "Take care of it," he said. "Don't go driving it off a cliff."

I had fallen asleep staring at the sea.

I had fallen asleep crying.

I had fallen asleep crying at the sea.

I had fallen asleep fully engaged.

My passenger, the one whose indentation in the passenger seat forensic investigators might have found, told me something before he got out of the car. "Things are never as bad as they seem," he said. Or was it, "It's always darkest before the dawn?" Or was it, "Chin up, might never happen?"

Sat propped against the cold metal of the pay and display machine, the car became a signal pyre, warning passing vessels of danger. I felt the threat in my throat, thick and choking like the smoke I inhaled. I warmed my hands on the heat of its warning.

When the claims adjustor returns she brings a policewoman with her. The same one who held my hand on the day of the fire. How's that for coincidence?

"Witnesses have described a third party in the car with you," the policewoman says.

"That is reassuring. I was beginning to think I'd imagined him."

They both stare at me.

"See, she gets snarky and uncooperative when questioned," the insurance investigator says.

"It is in your best interests to cooperate fully with our inquiries." The policewoman reaches forward and takes my hand as she says this.

"It's been such an ordeal," I say.

The claims adjustor glares at me over a fresh pile of forms, clicking and un-clicking her pen but unable to cross out anything on the list in front of her.

The car saved my life. Or falling asleep did. Or both. What I might have done had I woken in the car to find it not burning is a mystery, an intangible other-worldly alternative of quantum physics. Somewhere I woke or never slept at all, turned the ignition and drove the car into the sea, the bodywork spiralling off like orange peel as it bounced down the cliff side. Or I woke and drove home and had a cup of tea. Or glass of milk. Or just sat and stared at the sea.

Except none of that happened. Or all of it did.

What I didn't tell the police is this. I drove the car to the cliff car park, though the cliff isn't so much a cliff as a tall hill leading away from the beach, landscaped to prevent erosion that has eaten away at this coastline dramatically since the seventies. I sat there imagining the sea taking a big bite of the coast, sucking in the car and me with it. I felt the water fill the inside, pressure squeezing me into my seat as I sank to the sea bed.

I closed my eyes and only opened them again when the car door opened. I had left the doors unlocked. Beside me sat a young man with wild eyes. He was staring right at me and smiling.

"Can I have this?" he said and tapped a grimy finger on the dash above the car stereo.

I nodded.

"Thanks."

He pulled a large screwdriver from the pocket of his combats and set about wrenching the stereo out of its socket.

"Didn't mean to scare you," he said. As he worked, he gripped his tongue in his teeth in that way that men do when they concentrate.

"You didn't," I said.

"Only you looked a little startled." He ripped the stereo free with a screech as he said this.

"Did I?"

He tugged out the cables that connected the stereo to the car and grinned.

"A little."

He placed the screwdriver back in his pocket and held the stereo unit with both hands as if checking the weight.

"Thanks for this," he said, opening the door to get out.

I spoke the words before I thought them.

"Could you stay for a bit?"

He looked at me for a moment.

"Just until I fall asleep?"

He looked at the stereo and then at me.

"Seems a fair enough trade," he said.

We sat and listened to the sea chewing at the beach below.

The police fail to find a cause for the fire. Though it started somewhere under the dashboard, faulty wiring was ruled out. They ask about the missing car stereo but I tell them it didn't have one. Arson, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, is also dismissed as a possible cause.

"Act of God," the claims adjustor says.

"God? Really?"

"You realise what this means?"

I nod and sign the forms, happy for it all to be over.

I am required to pay for the disposal of the car.

"I think I'll have it back," I say.

The police and the claims adjustor have the same nervous look in their eyes when I tell them this.

"What do you intend to do with it?" they both enquire. I don't say and they give up asking. In the end, I think they're happy to be rid of me.

I pay a local garage to collect the car.

"Are you sure you want it here?" the tow truck driver says, climbing about on the flat bed, unfastening the thick grey safety straps from the car, readying it to be winched down from the truck. "You'll get done for abandoning a vehicle."

I watch the car slide down the ramp, amazed that the wheels, tyres melted into formless black, still turn. The car, once canary yellow, is now patterned in blacks and bronzes and flashes of white, the path the flames took visible in the melting of plastic, the blistering of paint and discolouration of metal.

"I'm not abandoning it," I say.

I wait for the tow truck to pull away before climbing in behind what remains of the steering wheel. The ravaged stump of the driver's seat presses uncomfortably into my thighs as my stare passes through the windscreen, over the cliff and into the sea below.



Image by Lars Sundstrom

Three Poems

Erika Suni

Bee Hive Removal

i.

My father is hospitalised.

Invasive cardiology--sounds like: exploratory space odyssey. sounds like dogs who walk upright, like circular boxes. When the surgical doors close, the doctors fly x-ray airplanes.

ii.

Ask me a question.

With a knife? With tiny cameras, tiny crews, searchlights strapped to thumb-size skulls? a ball of flame to sear a ventricle. We're trying to cut down on organs around here, the doorways to our mouths grow clogged.

iii.

Sedation

hits like sudden embarrassment. I remember my father playing dead, as if his skin were isolated in its drama and the rest of him were gone.

In The Hospital The Nurse Apologizes

she has misspoken
you are not dead
it seems
the water in your lungs
can be collected
your son has punched
his knuckles out
in the waiting room
we became objects
hollow fruit, empty
bowls of echo
we did all we could.
your face was silver
the last time we saw you
the ambulance driver
made jokes, attaching
a cup to your mouth.
in the hospital the nurse apologizes
the tongue slips
a mistake. you
understand.



Image by Keith Svinski

Poem For A Dog Found Trapped On A Porch

her ribs stood out
like cardinal objections
like contentious war objectors
stopping traffic with their bodies.
her spine
the abscess of flesh
her teeth
moved the air
like traffic-conductor
arms, like claws
of a truckstop toycatch
squeezing out nothing,
barking for meat.
her body on the last steps
of being a body
a circle that consumes itself
the gut, lifeboat sun shrunk
who looked at the heart and winked
here's looking at you, kid.

Three Poems

Howie Good

Dooms Of Love

We go to the Museum of Broken Relationships when there's nothing else to do. The security guard seated just inside the door dozes with his mouth open. Wounding comments play continuously in the background. Other couples seem to hurry from room to room, but we linger over the exhibit of old love letters, beautiful handwriting that is nearly illegible behind the fractured glass. Out front where a brother and sister cry for their missing parent, it's begun to get dark. Birds pause in their migration to listen, amazed that electricity passes through such slender and dented wires.



Image by Griszka Niewiadomski

Binge

The only thing I taught him, the old man said, was how to drink a fifth a day. Miners who had died in childhood walked into the bar after finishing digging their graves. I got up frequently to look out the window. Each time I returned, a woman with your red gold hair was analysing the long silences as if they were dreams.

Empty Trains Stalled Between Cities

Walk along the tracks
picking wildflowers

painted plates and lampshades
ghostly little boats

as if it was supposed
to mean something

Fear Of Landing

Sam Duda



Image by Esther Seijmonsbergen

It screams before it roars, reminds you it's going to hurt. There is a wobble, a bounce, a rubber squeak across tarmac; and then, as though a string has been cut up above by a puppeteer, the world drops at one side, falls away, the collapsed lips of a stroke victim. The ratter-clatter compartments lift like lids, eyeballs inside spilling luggage tears, fat drops shaped like violin cases and hockey sticks; candy-wrapped paste-ad smiles, palms flat, nails neat, smooth the lids closed, respecting the eyes of the dead. Something clunks hard beneath, a sharp tubercular cough. And you'll be sucked inside out-- collarbones, lungs, tendons pulled from your mouth and your pores-- a cabin full of crabs and sleepy lobsters, red-faced, with drooping tails like oxygen masks, flapping, swinging in time, metronomes counting down your last few moments, your last few chances to remember.

Your head rests in sweating fingers, looks through the window at marshmallow below. There is a *bing bong* and you expect elevator doors to open onto the sky, but it is just the sign over your head. Hands pulling each other apart. Click-click-click around you, knitting needles, people freeing themselves, shuffling just because they can; but you choose to stay still. Your hands play with paper and scissors and stone, but they play alone; it is not the time for a man afraid of the word *lump* to lose. Next to you, Eve hands you a sweet to suck, tells you it's the safest form of travel. But it's not worth it, and you

know that now, and it will be your last. With Eve, perhaps, it is the end, too. You couldn't bring yourself to hold her at the end.

There is a dip as you change course. You hum softly to yourself and trace imaginary lines in your mind. Patchwork fields spread beneath as you strain to see your shadow, the stain left by your being, but there is nothing; maybe you are too far away, or maybe the sun has gone for now. You look at the back of the seat in front of you, searching for different shades of grey, anything inside the plastic sheen. The light flickers and it makes you want to sneeze. A waft of cool scented air smothers you as Eve flaps a makeshift fan in front of her collarbones and earlobes; a stray strand of hair wraps around your throat like a garrotte, and you cough. She turns to you, as though to say, what? WHAT? but you just cover your mouth and watch the fan--a laminated safety card awash with red crosses--beat at the air, relentless as a killing spree. It has been months since you felt anything, since you last wanted or needed to reach out to her, to touch her, months since the smell of her was anything more than that waft of scented air.

It is cold at your feet and you check for holes, but perhaps they are inside, in your socks and memory, and you need darning, tying together with nostalgia needles. Click-click-click freedom. You remember your last chance on the cage steps before they wheeled them away, each metal square a moment, the tarmac a mirage blur beneath. There were little fingers reaching into your mouth, hooking you in the cheek, little fingers purple and screaming like bulging veins. *But your feet never left the ground.* And before you went up, you looked back, back past Eve and before you wanted it simple; there was no one there to wave you off, no white handkerchief behind the glass, no footsteps tearing through Departures.

It is levelling out at last and so, for heartbeats, you can imagine that everything is normal, until it staggers, tottering like a drunken juggler, and a searching arm reaches out--the burning torches on their way down, hot and red and incorrigible--and that delicate arm (no elbow, of course) is clawing for something real to grab onto, but finds only the empty horror of nothing. But once, a lifetime ago now, you were delicate, too; it was you who was reaching out, your arm rigid, or holding back, or pushing. That's right, you pushed Nina away,

you pushed her; you sliced her in two through the stomach, used that sorry weed of an umbilical cord as cheese wire. But it is now you need her back, her fingers through your sweating fingers, that purple dot on her knuckle; it is now you need to feel her beside you after the nights of dreamy sleep and frustrated mornings, when she slips away back under the covers or into the first-tea kettle steam.

You feel for your stomach to keep it all inside but it nearly comes back up. A regurgitated Nina on the camel in Cairo, grabbing its humps, hanging on for fear of falling, her hands glued together with sand and spit. Her eyes flashing, looking for a way to lose herself in the catacombs. But that was when she wanted to be found, before she started to avoid your sphinx stare. You try to forget, but it will all return, it's rising now, stinging your throat. The night you walked in the rain and she told you about Manet and you kissed her on the stairs, her hair wet, her eyes flashing, her Nina eyes, ever-changing. Or the summer before it all fell out. The patio, the lone deckchair to share, the wood too hot to touch, the path that stretched down to the river at the bottom, the subsiding jetty, the frayed rope waving in the current.

Eve floats a hand in front of you; she is asking you if you are hungry, if you are thirsty, but you just shake at her, shake that no, you are not, and your eyes are back on the window and the shapes below, the hills that roll like camel humps, camel lumps, rivers cutting as though they have whispered the end before. A trolley passes noisily, sliding down the incline, its wheels stubbornly locked. A man with gaps in his teeth waits, then strides to the front and the toilet. There is a murmur that sweeps along and over the heads, gathering force like storm clouds in a thick wind, rumouring of mountaintops poking through, fingers jabbing up at you.

You have no idea where you are going; you have never dared to imagine stepping out on the other side. And now below is nowhere and anywhere. It is as though you have just gazed into the eye of the crystal, the Aleph, and you know, you just know where it will all end, where the tunnel stops, and what will be left careening in the skidding tyre marks on the runway: pages pulled from a diary, a passport photo from the time you let your beard grow, booking reference EQ2736A.

It is windy on the ground, they are saying. Press back, push yourself straight, watch, if you dare, the paper butterflies keeping you alive (frailty thy name is trust) as the sun loves and toasts, picks out the wing detail. There is a bang, a howl, fireworks in the basement. Eve's face is knitted and knotted into nothing. People do it every day, she says, or something like it. You nod and look at the window again. The camel, the patio. The river, the frayed rope in the current. Shortly Eve asks you what you're thinking about, but you just shake at her, tell her it's nothing, and you're soon back at the river again, your finger frayed in the current, Nina's legs long, reaching above you, over you, over the water. Her body a bridge. Before the keystone fell out.

And then the last time you saw her, in the street, but she had to rush, back to the man who was waiting in a car. It was raining and her hair was wet again. You wanted her unhappy, but she laughed and flashed her eyes and told you that he was *so* good for her. She said he was only small, but he had great ideas and they were just publishing his first book. And then she left. And you went and got drunk and stared at the short men. And you didn't touch Eve for a week.

Outside there is a glimpse of a hole in the land, a dark wound bitten into the crust, and for a moment you long to be pulled into it, drained into the centre of the world, where it all starts, where it is pink and warm and cosy. You look away and listen. Somewhere nearby ice is being rattled in plastic; it is a hollow smack in the stomach, a snapping twig in the park you walked across the morning she told you, a little after four, the first traces of a bloody sun smearing across the grass, and her cheeks flushed pink with panic. You hold it at arm's length, you wrap your fingers around it. There is a boom and a judder and a silence, a spiky intake of collective breath; up at the front they glance at each other and smile, roll their eyes, straighten the stripes on their candy-wrapped bodies.

Eve plucks a magazine from behind seaweed netting--at least you can swim from a sinking ship--and leafs through glossy pages offering city eateries, hidden cocktail bunkers, terra firma fun and games. She stops at a page here, a page there, sniffs at it, holds it out to you until you dutifully bury your head in it, then puts it back. You

think it smells of hospitals, of buckets filled with dirty water. Of freshly dug soil and dark glasses. You are playing paper and scissors and stone again, but keeping things equal, a stone in each hand. Your fingers are tempted by the scissor eyes, their opening jaws, the teeth snapping and missing. Outside the paper wings flap again, peel back like paint, like fruit skin, like tortured nails. You lose.

And then it happens, or else you feel it happen and the engine groans in pain. A girl in uniform screams through her eyes and it's easy to tell she shouldn't have; paste-ad smiles cleaved apart, bulging eyes fit to burst. Perhaps they say brace brace, but you find it hard to see the point. Maybe it's easier to put you back together when your teeth are intact. Jet streams spiral above, falling with you, whipped cream ripping through cloud. And you'll remember your last landing. Because they always say it will be quick, but it won't, not before, not during that wailing wait for the dull welcome of solid ground.

Fields below unfurl like tongues and lay fat, shaping the curve and verve of the earth, hiding the tree-veins sucking sap from the tractorwheel bootprints--a perfect blue scream--the insistent intestinal strings of mud--a turbulent lurch--a river covered in shadow, weighing the damage, its bedded pebbles hissing, wincing in anticipation. We spies, they say, we happy patients, we've seen you all before, and we'll see you all again. An agent orange balloon in case of water landing, something to hold onto, something to distract, floats by, a rebel head--nothing can hold you down--ears and rabbit teeth inked on to the squeaking rubber.

And you close your eyes and it's not Eve, but Nina in black, as you saw her last night, as you left her this morning. You weren't together, but she was there. Mosquito netting veil across her face, Nina with the changing eyes. In the old house, the rust on the bath, your music through her walls. The rooftops you imagined others creeping over. And the two of you below, curled together like speech marks. You wanted her angry, wanted her. You always knew she'd choose the city and you could never imagine her driving and you don't remember how she parted her hair. Only scratched photos in Cairo know it as it should be.

And Manet. You never got it. It was always something with her, the unfinished mural you sat and watched spring to life in the old

dust-riddled halls of the National Gallery, the shopping list doodles that ran through the chicken in honey. Camel spit passing between your fingers. You remember a life well spent in her hands, the old-woman, paper-thin hands that gripped a pen as though it were the fingers of a child, the spider-hands that should have played a piano. And then the night at Christmas when you finally got it. You never wanted out of that bed or the bag you kept her in, her words somewhere else now.

Paper beats stone beats scissors. Stone again, stones below, fists clenched tight, chips of flint, teeth on edge. You are winning, surely you are winning. You squeeze tighter, realise you could have been at the school gates right now, your eyes through crisscross fence, each metal square a memory. Beside you, fists bang at fists as hands and hair and howls torrent along the aisles, tearing the world inside out, hunting for anything to break their fall.

Or the summer before you lost the little one. The patio, the fingers unravelling in the current like the dying moments of the day. The golden sun on her swollen belly, the kicking killer within, waiting to do his own little murder. But now she is there and you are here. And now you don't know how to get back. It's late and you want to sleep and want to see her tonight but you don't, because you don't want her to vanish in the morning, replaced by something new, someone whose eyes will never change, whose hands could never play a piano. You hope she is unhappy and maybe they are all unhappy. You hope he is still too short and his book deal falls through.

You open your eyes and see that Eve is looking at you, she is pointing, but then her fingers are back in her mouth; she grasps at her seatbelt, pulls at it, waits for the click-click-click. It is so loud now that it doesn't mean anything. You are looking down and staring at your fingers. Someone behind is praying. And Eve is pulling at you, but like she wants to wake you. It is black and you cannot see anything, just a beam coming from the window, and you want to crack the glass, feel yourself sucked away into space. Eve stands and kicks out and you see Nina's feet, her knees, her thighs, naked now, just an umbilical belt wrapped around her hips.

The pinprick in her cheek, the purple finger dot. But what about our babbies, she said, what about our babbies. This morning she was gone, just as always. This morning you wanted night again. You knew how to find her there. The imprint of her teeth on her lower lip, jigsaw pieces you could press blindfolded. The storm on her wall, and you never have since. The poster, the walk through water. It was four. You are shouting now, shouting with the others. It was four, you shout. And Eve has left so you can be alone with your other, stroking at her face, watching her eyes change under her mosquito netting.

From the back a woman is screaming, screaming, and she is being torn at by someone with gaps in his teeth; she screams as he claws her, rips through her clothes, pulls her from side to side by her hair, and her voice rides alongside the engine. They disappear behind a forest of arms and legs, trembling branches waving towards the cabin, pointing further towards the forests below, the rivers smiling open to absorb you, suck you in softly.

You try to imagine Humpty Dumpty contemplating his jump, dropping a feather first, watching its sad smile arcs, its soft landing. Outside and below you see all the king's horses and all the king's men galloping over fields, disappearing then reappearing amidst the patchy puffiness, climbing geometric mountaintops, sliding across frozen lakes, wading through gelatinous mud, gluey as napalm. Better to be on the way there; the return could tear the suntan from your skin. Your face is covered in the placenta, and it is warm, cosy at last; the window world spins beside you and you feel yourself glowing pink as you watch the fields rolling like hubcaps--at least you can jump from a crashing car--the houses...the...church...is that a barn?...and there is singing nearby and you see people curled, snug, foetal, beneath their seats, and others in twos, bound together, floating somewhere, Siamese stillborn wavelets of panic. You notice Eve hanging from a seat, her fingers scratching at herself, and there is a wailing, a long screaming note and you wait, and you wait, and it will be the waiting that drives you away, sends you insane, shows you the last few moments, the last few chances to remember.

Two Poems

Jennifer Hollie Bowles



Image by Benjamin Farwick

The Wedding

She went to the grocery store on a winter's
day and swallowed the farce of eternity
gleaming in glossy Bride magazines.

She begged for a diamond ring, a white
fairy-tale dress, and expected to feel bliss
from fine linens and a primrose-covered cake.

Spring came, and they said vows to prove
they could love and fuck until death;
proved it again with a kiss and a dance.

The speech was given and the glasses
clinked. Husband-less chicks flaunting push-
up bras and taffeta fought for her bouquet.

But no one spoke a word about what would come
after she placed her whole life into a goddamn day.

The Marriage

She tried to forget the dream,
strolled through her house with bricks for feet,
searching for residues of herself in kitchen
sinks and tapestry pillows.

Watched her husband from his couch throne,
caressing the remote control with his fingers,
immersed in breasts and men throwing balls.

He had crushed the curve of her spine,

made her identity into salty spaghetti,

held her eyes open with needles,

drove the metaphor of a gun
so far into her mouth
that the taste of metallic never left.

She remembered the dream--
how her teeth had crumbled

slowly

and fallen out of her head.

Eager Platinum Hands

Garrett Ashley



Image by Dane VanderLee

Chaaya is everygirl, she wants her arms removed immediately. For when the chief surgeon engineer gives her better-quality arms she will play better, faster, throw the ball higher than the other little girls and make the baseball team when she finds high school in America. Her mother does not approve; she wants a complete daughter with perfect little brown flaws. Says mechanical arms do not age with growing girls.

"But Ji said I will never grow old," she whines. Chaaya is a perfectgirl, Chaaya is nobody's burden. The front door is open and she runs towards it, slides sideways onto Siddipet Road where her mother cannot spot her among the one million packed wall to wall walking or carrying a bicycle in every direction. Across the elderly folks' valley and down by Hickory Creek there is a row of tracks where the old engine runs. She creeps down the concrete wall and splashes

through the cold trashed water and sits beside the iron bars, feeling the oil on the planks beneath and wondering why her city has so many old things.

She hears a whistle blowing and lays back and feels the mould and sand shaking beneath her. She passes her arms up to the tracks, closes her eyes and imagines being a gymnast with glowing, platinum arms. The train is coming, slowly but surely. It is meters now, feet now, inches now.

Chaaya remembers her Ji's favourite bad joke. "I always knew when an old engine came through."

Chaaya pulled his stomach hair; she had heard the joke many times and did not want him to finish.

"You can see its tracks," he said. Laughing. Mother smiles. Chaaya is empty. A feeling in her right elbow and her left wrist. Both come off easily and she does not feel the pain. When she awakes there are wooden stumps where her hands should be. Not beautiful sparkling platinum. The rest of her flesh is bruised and black. Her mother is crying, and her Ji has been dead forever.

And when Chaaya is told she cannot go to America because she is not complete, she laughs. One step closer to the beginning of the dream, she thinks. Good arms, good arms.

Contributors

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