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Nothing

Between Buck Owens and Vivaldi what’s left to listen to but the stars, so I do, dialing the radio down to indeterminate static, what I always thought was absence, an aria of sizzling nothingness. Instead it’s the Milky Way radiating arrhythmia all the way back. It’s gossip of the vacuum. That nothing has never been truly nothing is why I believe, even still, in love. Beside two rivers I have lived nearly all my life and these beneath one sky muttering its endless alphabet of sine waves. Jupiter with its flock of moons and the stone from which we hope to squeeze one drop of water; red Mars pulsing in the blank field of night— I’ve wanted to leave Earth behind, gravity’s orphan at last, but not Earth with its two good seasons and two bad and not its angel-winged clams luminous in the mud bed of a river so distant from me I can’t remember where that water is, except that I’ve dreamed it, except that in it I sank all the way down.
That boy in the snowy late light
midnight TV gives the skin, blue then
dark then blue, is me. With my mind
shaped like a finger, I point
him out. This is before he will point
a borrowed bike downhill
and touch me in return. This, too, is before
rushing home in rain, through
woods, stopping in a clearing of clouds
and canopy to note moon
like milk on my skin, in the water white
and pebbled, for the first time
in my life. I called it home, the apartment
we would love in after class
and there she waited while I drowned
in my clothes, in that light
bouncing earthward from the sun a world
away. This is before I fell.
This is before I swallowed back
a new species of emotion
I’d never known to live within
my chest, before I said
not a word to her that suggested I might
go away and go unmissed.
This is before I fled. This is before
I hung in the elevator’s throat
and waited for the world
to catch back up, for the world to spit back
lost time. This is before
I lost a friend to the vacuum of his blood,
the blown veins leading
back to his heart. This is before
I loved three times. This is before
I feared all day to lose
the last, my heart pulsing like a lead cloud.
This is before. Curled
and in a clot, before long he’ll sleep.
He’ll rehearse another
life. All night long I wait and I watch.
One by one I write down
what he dreams.
When she tells me her name I’m thinking of Napoleon’s exile there. Of his hand in paintings, oddly tucked away, and the vague memory that it meant something, once. I’m thinking then of Bugs Bunny aping Bonaparte and how as a child I laughed but did not know the thousands dead in his name. I’m thinking not at all what she would like kneeling there in the aisle of this plane when she asks if I was born this way, and who in Chicago takes care of me, a wife, a girlfriend—she knows one or the other is in my life. When I tell her which two white rings of bone in my neck are fused, wired, made one, I can see her ardor marry grief and I want to save her from my life. I tell her that some now think Napoleon died of a hormonal disease slowly making of him a woman, his body white, smooth, hairless, with breasts a physician thought beautiful, and though she smiles I can’t tell which story she no longer wants to know.
On Being Asked Who the You Is in My Poems

You are always eighteen or married
or both, carrying inside you
a surgeon or a singer growing
away from you like a little cloud,
and you have just escaped
from the leprosarium hidden
beyond the horizon’s lead smudge,
slinking through damp kudzu
to rap at my window
in the slowly sprawling darkness,
in the sodden green glow
of these two nights, mine
and yours. Or you’ve retired
from a secret life,
the oath sworn upon your bleeding thumb
now broken. The petal,
a curled pink that fell
and boiled in the black mirror of my coffee,
for a moment today was you
just as you were the bone of a thin girl’s hip
swimming beneath her
skin like a fish.
Limbless girl
bowling via surrogate
while a jukebox ate through change,
your smile
once broke the earth open like a bone
ribboned with silk red
marrow. In the smoke rank air
all the world did
was turn and turning
away I began to keep your secrets like my own.
Questions for Godzilla

What of the atom’s split heart we made
for you and the godly flash-bang wrath,
the anguished song, the clawed gait,
the zipper by which one of us slips into
and puts you on, your death we dangle
like a carrot, your stunted son mewling
always, your ragged arch foes,
your bed in rock, in magma, in thick sea slime,
our fascination still, our morbid heart,
our scattering like leaves, our blood
that once was horrible, a Technicolor ichor,
what of the glowing spine,
what of the toy stings of stock footage flames,
what of the jets you swatted dead
from the air with unmistakable joy,
you of the plastic-leather, pebbled Pleistocene flesh,
you of the palsied fury, you
of the put-upon by dissemblers and disturbers,
you, what of the life burned
so cheaply into celluloid we are charmed,
what of autumn, what of the earth
we took you from, what of the sky’s wounded throb,
the sallow child darkened
in your shadow, what of those thousand fates
cut in coiling ribbons
to the floor, what of the heaven they hoped on
that glowed like your breath,
that sang only before you came,
that fell quiet like a feather,
what of the shouted orders,
the dread retreat, the fall of a world built to scale,
what is pain to you?