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Palomino

Her mouth pondered the sweet crush of wet grass as I approached. The honing moon electrified the wire fence surrounding her and shone white-gold on her angled face, her coat the pure color of newly minted coins human touch will later ruin. I only watched, breathless as her muscles flexed, tense in the symbolism—wildness broken—we always assign her kind. I tried to remember this was an actual body standing just inches from mine. I didn't want to forget the way description often does, wanting to own only rippling, only bending. Her breathing steamed the air warm and thick around us.

Against my better instincts I reached out, and when she turned, twitching and retreating, her empty black socket caught the light, the scarred skin of the eye like melted wax. I tried to discern the tragedy—bullet, beating, or disease—and could not blame her for wanting to leave my hand hovering, stranded in the night, outstretched to stroke this moment as a quick palm cups matchflame, knowing it cannot last.
The Abandoned Church of St. Mary Magdalene

We climbed the rusted fence, past No Trespassing signs, and slipped inside where the pulpit, now a pile of broken oak once stood, once holy enough to heal us both of the urges that tore off coats, unbuttoned our shirts

as if to let the falling ice that rimed the roof’s bare rafters sheathe our bodies too. The stranger pressed me to my knees

and unzipped as the streetlight on Kingshighway kept flickering across my forehead, a brightness as uncertain as forgiveness and nowhere near as warm as I needed. Above us, a woman—Mary Magdalene in stained glass—stood staring up trying not to watch us, tightening her supplicant hands, her penitence still somehow intact after years of neglect.

I looked as I worked until I could not see my wife’s eyes as pained as that saint’s. But when he came cursing

there she was as always, faithfully waiting outside the cave of her shallow sleep for my figure to part yet another night,

to carry home my constant Noli me tangere. The stranger cleaned himself, left me there alone with Mary Magdalene still pleading with a sky too blank and close to ever answer her and it was a long time before I could rise again, begin dressing.
Paradoxical Undressing

Investigators believe the couple died the same day they called 911 more than five times from a cell phone trying to explain their pickup was stuck in the snow and they were lost in a rural area southwest of Omaha.

—ASSOCIATED PRESS

He made his girl a nest in the snow, took off his coat and wrapped it around her thin shoulders. He had tried to call 911, but the operator, like a slow child, could not understand when he explained that passing cars were no longer cars but the larger, looming bodies of talking cattle and then wolves shooting across endless Nebraska.

They asked for an address, so he told them crystal falling. Some trees. A billowing, starry sky like a blanket-tent above them. He said they were two flashlights drifting off to sleep and nearly out of battery. Soon, he began to shed his scarf and flannel, and she too found she did not need his coat or the rest of her clothing. They made a pile next to the snow bank and climbed back into the hole he had hollowed, dead leaves as soft as fur beneath them.

But the search team found them too late, still locked in each other’s arms and stark naked. Paradoxical undressing,
the coroner called it, when instinct kicks in and sends
signals like gifts to the faltering mind that say, *This*

*is perfect warmth*. That night, they must have believed
the moon blooming through clouds shone as blinding

and hot as any sun, soaking its glare into their bare skins
until the still-falling snow sifted into a fine white sand

on some desert island of the imagination and she stopped
shivering long enough for him to hold her silent face

with both stiff hands and kiss the salty, already bluing lips.
Sex in the Rain

I imagined at first some kid and his girl had come to this dank and rotting covered bridge searching for a dry, hidden place to wait out a summer storm. I thought they must have made love—I wanted to call it love—and then had meant to memorialize it with these words sprayed over the rest of the graffiti:

simply, Sex in the Rain in dripping, fading red paint. But then I let my mind wander back to the dim-lit caves of Lascaux, to the finger of the lone, ancient hunter who traced those careful stick-figures of stags in blood and ochre. What if it wasn’t magic or religion, I thought, but raw hunger that drew what he ached for but could not catch? Instead, I imagined a teenage boy not unlike myself, skulking off in the middle of an August night so humid he could almost taste his own pulsing need with each new breath. See how his flashlight beam coaxes a glint from crushed cans, cigarette wrappers, and shriveled condoms, and watch as he measures every letter of the most perfect scene he’s never dared to conjure: a man next to him,
their bodies one shadow as rain begins to tap a beat
on the walls of the bridge. He takes out his paint can,
shakes it, and he writes it. He writes it big.
Catch

Streetlight climbs the wall and the web
spun inside my bedroom window. A recluse
casts his asterisk of shadow across my bare chest
and there, on my skin, another shadow—
a moth—moves in, drawn by the light and heat
this man and I have made inside.

He sleeps. The moth is caught and thrashes
its wings, though it must know this resistance
traps it more. There is tenderness, I think,
in the recluse that lets the other
body weaken itself beneath him, a kind of fidelity
to instinct in the way he refuses to end
the struggle too soon. And what now
in desire’s aftermath? The moth is nothing
but a black speck, leftover intention
as suddenly unfamiliar as the stranger
swaddled in my sheets, his body stilled, made
more useless, more ordinary by mine.
Regret

It can flay you, sure, fillet the fragile meat
of the mind until each thought begins to leak
its essence in a sizzle of sighing breath. Can be

the bedraggled woman staggering in her ripped
Cardinals tee through Forest Park each morning
fresh from the Baptist church stoop where she

sleeps, already sweating, dragging behind her
a fold-up cart of aluminum cans, pilfered strands
of copper wiring, the shining and weighty cargo

of grief she’s headed to redeem. Or it can be
the woman decked in khakis and crested polo,
spikes of processed hair gleaming like a corona

as she totes her basket through the food co-op,
stopping in the organic bulk aisle, aimless before
the open bin of steel-cut oats, letting the soft

stones tickle her palm then cascade between
her jeweled fingers as she recalls that long-gone
summer in Barcelona, ambling through the chaos

of La Rambla, the Moroccan boy she had met
at the hostel now holding her arm, guiding her
to the closest beach, reaching toward her sun-
burning cheeks as one of her hands sank into
the sand and found something hard, something
round—a coin—as the boy’s mouth finally met hers

kissing openly, the narrow inlet between heart
and memory already cautioning: after this you will
exchange scrawled addresses, make promises, but

he will never fall into your life again, will become
a symbol, a face dredged up once in a while to
remind yourself you have risked something, some

things have slid from your loose grip. Regret then
like that, a passing fluke that filigrees the everyday
even as she hurries toward the check-out, as she
glides through the glass doors, fumbling in her
pockets for something to offer that other woman
who waits with her own cart, her palm outstretched.
Against Seizing

The Pacific’s reliable crush-then-surrender picks up handfuls of sand and surrounds you with a sound like this persistent present tense that washes across both feet, its lace of foam anointing the skin with intricate salt-film that dissolves as incompletely as everything in love. As these waves illustrate the endless cycle of give and take, realize that you no longer trust in seizing each day and do not need a sun’s pulse to offer warmth, or to feel it. Believe no longer that you can crawl into and live each new moment like this hermit crab in the tide pool now folding himself small enough to fit a shell. The daily rush and measure of hours cannot contain the heart, the one in you that moves moon-driven in figurative space so capacious it absorbs the forces of human misery and joy always backstroking through it, kicking up this opaque, violent wake you wait out for the sake of a coming clarity.
Foreshadowing

Snow clouds fill the sky like a power
you never knew you had. The man next to you
on this rush-hour bus has stuffed plastic bags
into the holes of his coat and huddles close
to look out your window as if the sunset
might burst for once with the red of alpenglow,

as if these piles of snow were only beginnings
of mountains trying to rise up. But you know
the cold and ice will give up these plains again
as a robe gives up the body underneath. Color
always returns, if slowly, to the earth like the self
you thought you already were all winter.
The Birds Have Not Yet Left Chernobyl

The ancient widow thinks only about this year’s harvest and the stories of marauding fugitives. The words

\textit{radiation} and \textit{poison} wander her mind like the wild boar that trample the stalks of her cornfields and then

scamper off into the yellow-gray Ukraine horizon as she cocks and aims her husband’s favorite shotgun.

But she calls the albino swallows, which nest inside the cracked concrete sheath protecting the reactor,

angels each time they fly down to light in her garden. She sacrifices shrunken heirloom tomatoes to their crooked beaks and spreads seed for them on chipping window sills.

Treading the dense moss floors of the new forests that have reclaimed every crumbling courtyard, she heads to the edge of Pripyat River where the sage still sells the best mackerel and tells of her husband’s afterlife. Done frying dinner, scattering slivers of fish for the birds,

she settles in and sips her home-brewed vodka like silver plucked from the underside of the moon. She traces the glow of a few gaslight stars above and does her mending. Tomorrow, when the scientists pick their slow way
toward her cottage in masks and plastic orange boots
she will tell them once more she can never leave

her native land of Parishev. She knows the swallows
now gathering one-eyed and bent on the porch rails

are as helpless as children and still need her. She could not
live a moment or sleep without their malformed songs.