Essence

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Cover Photograph—Julie Stark

Mice and Men

Mice are the company of some men.
Late at night I hear them
gnawing, scratching
within the walls near my bed—
pathways through their world.

Inches away
on a soft white pillow,
gnawing, scratching
within other walls—
pathways through a different world.

—Jeffrey Gilbert

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Blackbirds

Black birds overhead
Flying this morning through mist
Vanish into white

—Chris Ventimiglia

Unwanted Lake

At the water fountain today
I was stunned by the notice
"Don't drink this water", it said
using many more words to say
just that.

Driving on I noticed
the yellow jacketed men emptying a
fire hydrant.
The road was filled with the stuff.
My car meandered for a brief
moment.

I applied lipstick in preparation for
the holocaust.

Further
around a corner and down
a bleak, tree skirted road
I heard on an electric funnel
speaking at me
raspy and knowingly
"Attention, do not use the water in
(anystown)
for drinking or cooking"
silence, click, and repeat.

I was fearful,
If we all drowned
what is there to differ us from
those buried by spaghetti
beneath the volcano
in Italy?
Their stomachs were full,
so is mine.

Ah, but we are vaccinated
and if you Mr. reader are a man
you may be circumcised.
And the average height is no where near
four feet.

We are also big and strong,
wide and soon to be thirsty.
The streams will trickle to a halt
and the breasts will dry
but
the important thing is
of course
that my lipstick remain
magazine perfect so I can shine
in my watery
two cent
grave.

—Kate Keenan
The water flows

The water flows gently through the window to your house. It engulfs the downstairs rooms and makes its way to your attic.
— You scream and panic
— your prized possessions, boxes filled with old memoirs, and dead bodies that dare talk no more.
Rushing for the attic door, the water surrounds your feet. And while you climb the staircase which seems endless, you’re startled by the staring faces that have rummaged through your secrets. They begin to mock and taunt you— And as the water gently taps you on the shoulder you run toward the sun —— forgetting about the failing balcony.

— Kelly Lee Nansteel

Valerie

Waistline, breastline roll as one
to and fro—her face is flushed—such massive skin.

— Chris Ventromiglia
Rendezvous with the Cold

"No one else is going to come."
A long silence, the frozen remnants of our frustrated rage, filled our minds with an inevitable, brittle blackness. Ten below, 3 a.m., two freezing hitchhikers, (the River Tweed long gone) and not a car to save us. Our lives were as desperately paced as those of travelers, not as those of visitors, yet the sleek, frigid motorway spread itself to what was before us—and to what was behind us—like the wings of some great mythological serpent in guard of ancient treasure. Now our lives seemed to have no pace, no rhythm, and time hung his head low—half in respect and half in shame—in tribute to the long, weary wait. Time hung his head, and the brittle chill crept, spreading numbness through us.

For a single, infuriating moment, (for I was reminded of my own despair) I thought that I heard a brief whimper. His frigid body huddled in insufficient bundles, my comrade began to succumb to the ritual, sacrificing his pain to the relentless cold. Dazed, he groveled to her gentle fury.

Refusing to acknowledge the futility of our plight, I gazed into the night. Suddenly I saw it—a light—a very singular speck of light moving slowly along the horizon. I tugged and pulled and drug his lifeless mass and cried, "Please, let's move. Keep moving. We must keep moving. There's a light—Come on! Get up!"

Like two mindless creatures, we scurried toward the light. Despite our haggard effort, one body whipped the other through crystalline toward the light. Our limbs were frigid, ready to shatter. We ran, and ran, time having no register.

"A train...it's a train! Come on! Hurry! Jump!" Desperately we flung ourselves upon the last car. We lay on a bed of coal, our passport to wherever. The ride seemed endless, but our despair was defeated by a new hope.

We did not speak again for a seemingly immense time, and the train stopped. Like two frightened mice swept from under a cabinet, two frenzied, shaken travelers threw themselves from their nook. The ground along the tracks was solid, grey, and it met us with a thud.

Before us were the silhouettes of grey box-like houses surrounded by frozen, linear, iron-spiked fences, and at once, my comrade screamed, and a pick-ax swung over his stunned cry.

"No—No! We're cold!"

"Please we're lost; we're freezing. Help us."

Before us stood our executioner, a thick dwarfish man with a huge bulbous nose, bulging eyes, and short-chopped, erratic hair. His face was ruddy and bespeckled with whiskers, and his twisted form seemed a mass of raw energy.

The ax remained suspended in time. Primitive reaction not defying blessed rationale, the man's eyes attempted so humbly to understand. The ax was slowly lowered and, as if an afterthought, flung to the ground with a grunt. The droll little hulk mumbled unintelligibly on and on. I understood only one word—coffee.

We were led to an odd room—a sort of locker—a room with iron walls—with cages and stalls, a huge fan and a shaft. My skin cracked. We uttered not one sound, but sighed in communion with our appreciation of salvation as we moved on. Finally the little ogre gestured for us to make our resting place and then disappeared. We dropped, exhausted, to our seats like two long-debating and weary clergymen. Time stood still, our host reappeared with coffee and blankets. He left us to our drinks, and when finished, we were thankful and slept.

—David Warcholak

J.P. Terlizzi
Alter idem

Delineavit, pinxit,

Ex mero motu,

Brutum fulmen,

Ars est celare artem.

Julie Stark
My sex

My sex waits for me like a mongrel waits on a leash
You wait moustache curled around twenty-four of my inches
Talk and our tongues flap to communicate laps our skin our hair our thighs
Sorry
I cannot suck you my thumb is a bad habit
I would lick my pillow
Scratch the sheets then watch the floral patterns dissolve on the carpet
If my knees shake must you notice that it's attached to my crotch?
And it wants for you to fool you to mix you to combine you too
I swiveled outside with the wind on the street no men at my feet
No feet at my ankles
I was a walking box
Uncontrollable were the fantasies that wished me raping secluded by
A plural me who felt and felt and fell
down to my knees all alone.

Can it be done when the sky turns pure vulture?

—Heather Kaye
And your house is stilled of me and my noise.

What more stark or truer revelation is there
than simply saying, "I have lied?"

A hopeless tight-jawed heartbeat
separates my insides from everything
Like a Razor
Too too sharp to hurt
Too deep to mend

How little I have found here of truth.
The least of all, true to themselves,
are abundant,
But with no strength left over
They slash and bypass one another
With no careful regard.

— Juliet Dixon Nace

On a Still Night

On a still night
the lake is alive.

On the shore
the crickets chatter.

Between the slips and boats
the ducks nestle.

They band together,
murmer few words until
the silence is broken by one loud knife that cuts the night air.

Upon a table
the trial awaits
and the thirsty hunter at its head.

— Shari Renée Schneider
Sitting in high chair view
radiator hissing rising smoke . . .
My eyes through the foliage rest on
snow robed steeples and rooftops.

Antennae like weeds stand erect

as I stretch to define the distant dwellings.

Underground,
rumblings remind me that there will always be
antennae and foliage in need of folding.

—Mariska Bogle
MEN AT WORK

I walked over a
Manhole cover tonight-
Heard a man underneath
Hammering. It wasn't a spirit
I saw the sign.

Though my feet didn't
Stay long enough
To feel the vibrations
Feel his distance,
Like a train.

Maybe after I passed
He screamed to escape . . .
Maybe he was contently
Building supports for the ground
Or contently breaking them down.

—Chris Ventimiglia

One side of death is flowers—
A swan-song end of existence
Whose siren call awaits the unwary

—Juliet Dixon Nace
High Water, Low Water

We poured into the playground to play our game.
We, a dozen or so shrieky little girls, played our game.
Two, we never knew who, picked up the ends of the rope.
We pranced circus-horse fashion over the slack, undemanding rope,
And returned to our places like field-cattle to fodder.
High water, low water.

The mysterious two raised the rope a foot higher.
The two, reflecting each other, raised the rope higher.
Still easy we glided over one-after-the-other in ripples.
But one chubby girl tripped and fell—she’s out of the game.
I vaguely wondered why the day seemed hotter.
High water, low water.

Three feet high, the rope taunted and teased us.
Three feet of water we must jump, leap, swim, struggle over.
The rule of the game says we must all be the same.
We try and some dive over neatly, some bellyflop, some can’t swim at all.
I try to be like them, but I tremble and totter.
High water, low water.

Why are the two rope-holders smiling at me?
Those twins who did not have to play, grinning at me?
I know them now; they are part of my self.
The nameless ones holding the ends of the rope are myself.
Recess is gone and the game is over. I’m glad; it’s been a bother.
High water, low water.

—Heide Melnick
Agora

(rune refrain insert)
and the garage doors began to quake
bunnies stopped havin' babies all of a sudden
all the snowmen from eternity suddenly
appeared at the respective doorsteps
fashion crashed to a deafening halt
blind men saw and saw men blinded
fear rested its tired torch in the sea.

Soft sleeves dip the edges of the pond parlor
As candidly pliant provisions are made.
Sit to stroke carnation calendar remains and
Stand to trip over enmeshed shoe strings.
"Yes" while grasping two-tone vision harbor
"No" please throttle tacit leftist languor.

Take two tin morsels make 'em magic
Consult my lamia here's her number.
Get the vessels fortune's calling
Build a plaza tired a'maulin'.

—Kate Keenan
Looking to the side

Those lines are only time,
not good, bad, or at all foreboding,
but maps of travels near and far.
We are in between these,
on the clean pampas,
exotic llamas, iguanas,
birds rest on our shoulders a moment.
Endangered species, rare fauna lie in the
flora quickly having each other,
again . . .
again . . .
always willing to fend for myself and what I
deserve, I invest in hunting
and gathering lessons,
so willing to be a most efficient
slave.
or dove with unreadable message
rolled like a scroll around
my legs,
steering my walk.

My hands gently touch the lines,
a sturdy thumb in the cleft,
fingers covering the paths perfectly,
and you are given a
new face.
You should know by now
mirrors have no
imagination.

—Kate Keenan

Horses in Winter

Crescent moon and her star
Brighten over a snow covered field
As horses become silhouettes
Fading into darkness
Pawing the earth for food.

—Chris Ventimiglia
Seldom Do We See Each Other And When We Do

They made love in sweet desperation, hungry
they ate expensive meat, in
cancerous pans they fried their meal
topped with ketchup, downing it in
a hurry, only to return to the smoky
bedroom to roll under the covers.

—Rose Graham

Yardstick

Dog on all four pause barks
(master at led pan hits the)
dog on all fours
back on a tree
looks up at leaf studded sky
turning yellow on a branch,
it will never reach the leaves
(we will never touch our God,
we will never kiss John Wayne)
splinters are what we are
wood trying to touch the stars are
the leaves
floating out of our yardstick perception.

—Heather Kaye
**Unheeding**

When the rain came falling,
I felt the water upon my hair

The warm air was cooled
and the heavy feeling was gone

I could not hide beneath the trees
for the rain still found me

The forest submitted to the wind
and the branches gave way to the strength of the storm

My path lay strewn with battle remains
where the trees had lost & the wind overcame

The wind continued on
leaving behind scattered leaves that would soon wash away
and return to the earth

The storm came and then was gone.
I crossed the bridge, kept walking, wiping my face, not stopping, watching
the storm leave the forest.

—Shari Renée Schneider

**Flaws**

I am afraid of pink notices
on toilet doors—afraid
they will say
"OUT OF ORDER".

For a week I have been in a house where
a boy tumbles, jumbles uncomprehended words.

Today a woman talked
of melting snow beauty—
she had a silver makeup reflection
sparkling from her forehead.

Today I asked a blind girl
if she saw the apples & cake—
when we parted, she said
"I'll see you later".

And in this house
the toilet is out of order.
we urinate in mason jars—
dump out second story windows.

—Chris Ventimiglia
(For Jill Levine)

Like you
I keep my written poems
neatly worded, neatly spaced,
tucked away somewhere.
They are seldom read (save a few such as this).

And I like you, too,
I keep my unwritten poems
free of words, free of spaces,
and tucked away somewhere.
They too are seldom read.

—Jeffrey Gilbert

When we wear black clothes we notice how much
white there is in the world. Some kids eat
dirt. When I did it tasted nutritious and
pungent. I didn’t really eat it (as in
ingest) but sucked on it for a while
and spit out what was too large and
scratchy. My brother a few feet
away eating all the tomatoes
in the garden, lying in be-
tween the rows of vines.
Then we went on the
monkey swing. It
is sad that we
can only tell
how old a
tree is by
killing
it.

—Kate Keenan
Heat of Myself

Lying in the heat of myself
sweating scalp of red torments
beneath perfumed lashes and the
pressing desire to be elsewhere.

I await my turn . . .

caught, like an albatross
whose wings won’t let him walk.

—Mariska Bogle