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Asphyxia

—after Eavan Boland

1.

The rising heat of an August afternoon.
The layering of haze. The air thick with it.

Guarding the lives of swimmers jackknifing into the diving well.

Christine, how does the body react to drowning?

The lengthening strides of the heart rate. Blood retreating to the chest cavity. Panic. The collection of carbon dioxide in the blood. Then, the inability to hold the breath any longer. The opening of the larynx. Water soaking lung tissue. The sinking of the body. Arms parted, legs spread. The last wet sighs of breath.

The escape of some lighter, aerial being to the surface.

2.

Daybreak—the choking sounds of grief in the local paper.

Over breakfast, I am reading the lines of another body, face-down in the Hackensack muck.
Whispers of suicide shake the tree branches. The river has its doubts.

My hands are drawn to the newsprint photo of local strangers huddled near the river. They note the woman’s sunken position in the earth, the silt embracing her body.

What is drowning anyway but the filling of something (water, mud, death) into empty spaces?

Outside, my mother is filling the birdbath. The goldfinches, above, are warbling a familiar song, some final argument for life.
Holy Cross Cemetery:
North Arlington, New Jersey, 1918

I’ve committed this landscape to memory: the foreground of blistered farmland, shadowed dark by its future to house the dead; the quiet fields my grandfather worked on as a boy. Hired to poke holes in the soil to let the earth breathe, he scratched bronzed lines of grief into yellow birch wood instead, rubbed twigs together to mark the paths of ghosts around him, scent them wintergreen. His younger sister had housed some strange flu that summer; the land, in mourning, puckered and heaved her dry coughs. Unable to argue for life, my grandfather could only rub the dry sediment between his fingers, citing the first evidence of loss.

Strange things, hands, the way they discern the living from the dead. My hands are all I have of my grandfather now, thumbing for inconsistencies in my mother’s patchwork garden. They are anything but merciful in late spring, pulling snake root I mistake for rotted weed, strangling the new shoots that spread like hungry mouths. I have been told to be gentle, as the flowering greens are our only extension to the beings of the past. I am not so sure; the earth has rarely reaped what such bodies have ever sown.
June. The sound of my father shifting through aging slides. I am watching his long strides at about twenty, leading scouts through the sparse woods of Ardmore, Oklahoma.

Midwestern ghosts projected onto our living room wall.

*Fifteen miles we hiked that day,* my father tells me, motioning to his bum ankle swelling with the rising heat. I can hear his shattered ankle crunching when he moves,

the sound of metal scraping against brittle bone. I know what he is thinking—*if only my ankle would still hold*—and I want to tell him that he is full of it, that he should be happy. But what do I know of his suffering, of those aluminum screws posing as healthy joints, of the need to rebuild after initial collapse, to fill in the spaces?

I soon begin to hate them: the shallow lakes, the dry grass, the knotted trees that spill onto our walls, onto my father, illuminating his sad form.

What I would do to carry my father now, to lead him out of his memory, a sprawling forest, to shake his drying soul of Oklahoman dust.

Outside, the shadows of neighboring houses are crawling into our yard.

Darkness always comes next, my father’s crutch.
MY FATHER ON SNAKE BITES

—Holdenville, Oklahoma 1977

I saw the boy and knew his age: young, the way he tucke his knee to his chin.

Knew, too, how death draws boys to receding shores: a water moccasin, half-buried in the thinning silt, its belly speckled brown by a turbid sun.

Dying snakes are Houdinis, feigning death for a young audience. Pushing their stomachs out like some Shakespearean fool, they wait to stick the world with one last comic jab.

I never understood the need to punish. I can only trace the boy’s blistered wound, layer thick bandages to lessen the bite.
Family Resemblance

The gathering of family into my grandmother’s kitchen: the bodies of the past blurring into those of the present.

I’ve only heard this whisper once: the murder of my great-great grandmother in her Polish home.

In front of her children, they shot her. The beauty of morning: the dust settling onto a limp body, a Nazi slug to the temple.

No pictures of the dead in my grandmother’s house. How can I reconstruct the broken body?

Her sunken jaw, pronounced, like my grandmother’s.

Her peeling hands—my mother’s—split at the tips from washing floors.

The fragile curves of her body—my sister’s, the way she curls to sleep at night.

And me? How I rise to meet morning through lace curtains, prop open the door to invite men without faces into my home.
**Promised Land**

—South Hackensack, New Jersey, 2007

The rising of tobacco smoke at dusk:  
a new sort of incense.

I am finding remnants of faith on abandoned street corners:  
the wetted ash of snuffed cigarettes drawn out in holy signs,  
the grates of storm drains baptized in saliva.

This is South Hackensack, where the air is thick  
with the stares of migrants thumbing for petty labor.  
Boys whisper calloused language into peeling walls,  
learned from watching their mothers scrub  
the depression out of other people’s grout.

They had all grown to know the kinds of miracles  
that never came, learned to turn away forecasts  
of fiery rains and rushing floods. I, too, had once  
wiped my doorposts clean in hopes of meeting  
my maker, only to be left shaking in the sheets.

I am walking. A man wrapped in woolen dreams  
is nestling into the concrete, and begins muttering  
for the repose of my soul.

I watch how slowly  
night comes without protest.