

our own soft



katie clark

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nostrovia! press

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for t.m. & h.m.

for cody, in therhododendrons

i. november, before

we were standing still at a high school poetry reading,
cusped somewhere between brown sugar dreaming
and waking up with too many teeth,
told
(in case we hadn't thought of it)
that where and what we were
wouldn't last.

you read a story about a forest,
about a family lost in the evergreens in 1980.
something happened in there,
i never asked you what.

it was tragic, i think,
but all i remember is your liliated mouth
wrapping around *rhododendrons*.

the word was never the same for me, promise.

ii. june, that year.

the last time i saw you
was our high school graduation:
too believable now.

iii. june, a year later.

the last time i thought about you, i was working on a farm in georgia.

i was pulling weeds in the garden when i heard her:

a fawn inside the fence, days old, her mother outside watching.

she ran to me all legs gentle, and i recoiled like white fire,
to touch her would be to kill her, i knew this,
even as she lay beside my leg. i wanted to know her, but her mother
was in the rhododendrons, mad and bloodied with new love,
trying to take down the fence with her face, her body, her anything,
the doe's soft wet fear dripping onto the white petals.
it took hours, but we managed to move the fawn back outside the fence.
i watched the mother take her back, getting blood on her speckles.
the rhododendrons remembered for days.

iv. november, after

you died some time before i woke up on my birthday.

i was turning 20; you will not.

i don't know what you did, only that you did it, and that i can't blame
you.

tonight, they will read your writing in jacksonville but i am in
massachusetts

and everything is starting to lose itself to winter.

i am reading the rhododendron story.

i am wondering if you meant azaleas and

i hope not.

v. may, after

they're blooming now, cody,
the rhododendrons, the aster, the gentians, the phlox.
i hope the family
 (you)
 made it out.

rainsville, '03 / s. hadley, '17

last night i bled onto my sheets,
the red showing up on red:

it is february (again),
it is happening (again).

i am june-boned.
i am thinking of alabama:

i am thinking of my younger
hands running down my legs
looking for bumps through
the sweat & clay,

holding them all in one palm

to wash off later. warm pond,

when it rained the ground
became good again & this was

the way god wrote in cursive

remember,

so i did.

the truth is i've burnt the sheets
in all of my poems but i never
could bring myself to light
the match or throw them away.

my body is moving through what
it knows i don't.

i am thinking of your fingers guiding
my sleep-heavy hands across your
body, how i imagine it now:

pulling ticks off of something other
than me: the kitten's belly, my cousin's
younger back,

wondering if it will hurt

frozen over.

back when truth was willing & simpler:

what i held in my mouth before
& after you.

remember,

so i didn't.

seven pines

i.

i was a boy until i wasn't a boy / until you made me sure of it / a
small god / we were in the tree / & you showed me / pulled it out of
your shorts / i walked home with urine in my hair

ii.

so, fine / so / i learned to dirty my pretty knees / started biting my
lip til it bled / a bow in my hair seeing how far / i could spit the
dollar-store lipgloss / off my mouth / spending all of my leftover
sunlight / with you & the others / hiding from the hunters we made
ourselves into / when we lost / the round / hunched in the marsh
grass / caught in the briars / frozen pizza in the driveway / sucking
stolen key limes to the rind

iii.

& that time we were running / then: / face to dockwood / skinned
my chin / what i thought / was bone deep / & you licked the red
from your palm / & you bent over the side / brought handfuls of
dirty water / to pour over my face / the electric salt sting / how my
mother made me wash it twice / when i got home

iv.

remember when your neighbor would throw rocks at the schnauzers
/ so someone threw a rock through her window / & someone else
was dared to try on the shock collar / & all we could do was watch as
he convulsed on the pavement / one mississippi / two mississippi /
three mississippi / before anyone helped him / you told me i could
say *shit* so i did

v.

so i said *shit* again / when you slipped / breaking your arm on the
pool deck / & i saw you cry / your bones / your blood staining the
tan tile / like lipstick melting / red in all the little pools / & you
asked for your mom / so i lost all fear for you

vi.

in 3rd grade i didn't flinch when you called me pretty / even though i
hadn't gotten my period like the other girls / you liked / or in fourth
grade when / you dared your friend to kiss me / with tongue / even
though i had my playclothes on / how you held my arms down /
watched / him take what he took / let him

vii.

that night i filled my mouth so full of mud / it was all i was

february water

moves like milk does:
it doesn't.

this was never something i picked out.
i just watched you walk across a lake, and it was
mid-winter,
and so it happened.

i think today i loved you,
which is another way of saying
it doesn't always happen in the order that it happened.

on monday,
i found my last-year body floating in the lake you walked across.
there was no reflection.
the lake has thawed and frozen over again,
and again, and she is less for it.
she was angry i cut my hair.

tuesday,
we are in the basement and you are holding spines.
i watch as they clean crooked
curl around your fingers,
alive, somehow, and not.
to think this was body, but now,
here in your hands: bone.
a week later,
there was my spine and how you held it,
but i don't remember that part.

wednesday,
i am still lying on your desk,
your hands and the projector light are
dewing over my shoulders like morning.
you kiss me even though my jacket

is orange and i like how the cold
tastes on you.

thursday,
a year after this, my partner reaches for me, but i no
longer have any bones. i'm trying to tell you
i think i know how the story ends now.

friday,
i don't know what it means or what it doesn't that i accidentally
smiled at you
in passing. i heard you have a job that makes you grateful
and that makes me grateful.
i need you to know you did not ruin me.

what's left of saturday:
gold glitter and whiskey spit.
my friend leaves, you stay,
we all regret this.

i was wearing my roommate's basketball jersey.
i do not think i brushed my teeth before.
i remember it like this:
i don't. i had breakfast.

you tell me i didn't say yes,
but that we could try it again.
you said you didn't have to tell me;
i hated you for that.

sunday,
i wake up with your body by my body
like a needed fact. it happened. it still
happens, but less now.
the week starts over.
i think maybe this time,
i will pull myself out of the lake,
walk her home.

while you play pink sugar & publix brand oregano off of
your phone speaker

/ we say nothing /

of the salt coiled in the
dark, / of the figs rotting in the sink, /

of our own tongues /

so safe within the tombs of our mouths /

we hardly notice

when they touch / & won't talk about it later /

(but tell me,

what did you see on the beach that night,

/ the beast made of

sea & teeth) /

somewhere near 27th st you can still find my arm
sticking out of the sand at low tide, /

your legs in ponte vedra

/ we haven't found them yet / instead, /

in the marble &

flicker of the light / we cut green apples, / rub the skin on our
necks, / sleep in the bathtub, /

ignore these moments of our

skin / meeting /

take everything that hurts a little / as a hint to

keep going /

but not this, /

not our own soft, / too known /

to kill

/ gently /

cinnamon whiskey

everyone told me the winter would be bad but
no one said it would be cold all of the time.

it hasn't been over forty degrees in over five months
and the lake keeps freezing and thawing and i'm less for it.

for now, it's 10pm and twenty degrees and my friends are all smoking
cigarettes shirtless outside for the second night in a row.

it seems unfair now to live the life i wanted at fourteen,
but here we are.

my 9th grade self keeps drunk texting me things like
“get home safe,” and “can you buy me fireball,” and

i can see her sitting cross-legged in a circle in someone's
upstairs bedroom in borrowed pajamas with a red cup

and someone is telling them all what it was like to
have sex with a boy named jack or rob and

she's asking me what it's like but i'd rather her remember it
this way: small, but significant and eventual.

i don't want to tell her what's coming, that the first time
will scar because she won't say yes, that it won't be

the last time, that sometimes it's not fact, it's
whoever gets there first and says their version louder.

she shouldn't have to know that sometimes it's not fair to
have a body, that no one tells you how to know

whether or not you wanted it if you didn't scream or push,
that sometimes the absence of yes is a dry mouth.

i don't want her to see this part, but she has to
to know why the time by the water mattered so much:

the river salt and that kind mouth. right now,
i don't think she knows it won't be jack or rob,

that it will be those long smooth legs draped over
our lap like folded laundry on a tuesday morning, simple and

happening. this will be the real start.
soon, she'll know how love will make her unknown to herself

and she will be glad for it, grateful. everything will change
and it will end, and it won't, and she'll live.

but for now, i say, "thank you," and "no,"
kiss her goodnight.

the articles noted what color sweater you were wearing but none of them mentioned your shoes

(it was red).

the articles didn't say what color dress

she had but i think
purple, maybe, i don't know why

(in every memory i have she is a live oak).

they just said "28" and "63" and "ak-47"

and body and body and body.

i have thought a lot about what i would have said

had i seen you walking across campus.

i think just *go home shane*.

because she said *stop*,

she said *don't do this*,

& you did, so i don't know

why i think it's my fault.

i have thought a lot about what your sweater looked like

after those six rounds in the office:

red/different.

i think you saw it,

(*gunshots*)

knew,

(how come the dead stay dead?)

forgot the ninety other bullets

(florida is underwater)

you tucked away in a zip-lock

bag in your pocket

(i buried march in the yard)

shane,

i have been thinking about your mouth on the muzzle of the gun:

teeth & red.

(everything after the shovel)

11 months after

you and i sleep a foot apart in a twin bed. the inches feel damp. like water, only still. stagnant. i am underneath them. they get in my throat and my nose sings. someone told me it's something about saline levels, why it burns. that the feeling is cells drawing in too much water and bursting.

in the morning you say sorry for saying what you said and it has to be okay so it is. if you want we can call it by another name and forget about it, inevitable, but that won't make it not true or better. it's not such a simple question.

the truth is i am but i'm not there yet. the truth is i don't know if there is a yet or a there and so maybe this is just ordinary now. maybe i am treading water. maybe the fever has gone cold for the time being and time is being slow.

i'm still trying to help february get its jeans back on, but it is gold glitter and whiskey and crying and it's freezing outside. i keep saying that it's not winter anymore but this doesn't make it any better or more true. the cold feels like her mouth did: i didn't ask for it either, but here we are.

here's the thing: i can't remember what happened but i woke up sore and with the taste of someone else's spit. she was there, we made plans for later. there's still pink hairdye on my favorite sweater.

to put it differently: when i was five a mirror fell on top of me and it scattered across the floor. it was so wet: the blood and the glass and the fear and the hands. i was afraid of my reflection for years. she is the mirror now. her body is the falling and the on top of me and it happens over and over and over again. see?

sometimes it is not like this. sometimes it is not always. sometimes you make it better or at least less loud. sometimes you don't and that's okay and not your fault. sometimes i feel like i'm made out of spinning plates and all of the spinners are hungry. sometimes i think the spinners may want to kiss me but they'd put lipstick on me first, cover my eyes with coins and lay me down. body trauma is body trauma, even on the days i can cover my ears.

what i mean is i saw her on the sidewalk and i took two coins out of my pocket and slipped them over my eyes. what i mean is being alive is exhausting. what i mean is sometimes i don't want to be, but this doesn't mean anything more than that. i want to believe in all of the things you believe in and i want the believing to be simple but today i traced my hand against the wet window of last year and when i pulled away it wasn't my hand anymore.

i am trying to empty myself of it. i am trying to turn this all into art but some of it just isn't pretty or important. here's to thinking it owes me anything. turns out some of it is just rot and leftover breath. useless. make way for the cold. there goes fate, there goes reason— wave goodbye, it happened.

i want there to be a better ending so i write it myself. at five the mirror never fell. at nineteen she never touched me. at nineteen she never touched me. at nineteen she never touched me. there, better.

what i really meant when i said better, or should've: it happened. i'm alive anyway. some morning you roll over. no more inches. we wake up. coffee with milk. slightly burnt bagels. it's okay and then it's not and then it is again for a while. this is the good ending.

i heard someone say jacksonville today

& i have been thinking about the night you wrapped
your car around a streetlamp.
are you awake?
are you up?
how did it happen?
do you remember picking out peaches?
i have been thinking about that night
on the bridge &
the lights dripping down the city that wanted us,
how i felt you in me like bone,
like breathing.
could you teach me how to do that again?
i can't quite catch
my breath today, do you have a hold on yours?
when was the last time someone
walked you home?
did their hands sweat (i hope so)?
you deserve someone to make nervous.
how are you?
how is seeing the water when you want?
does it feel like something
belongs to you?
do you remember how those rocks came
out of nowhere?
how you stood in the tide pools
& when the rain came:
ready,
shirts open, public & careless
in wet bras.
we were alone that day.
i have been opening i think,
but it is not tide pools
or warm sugar:
hot water,
sand.

tell me something new &
what is it to be

real people?

i miss your 9pm skin.

our world wasn't this one,

but i still know the beginning of it.

your body moving up the ladder

and my body following:

the genesis & the rooftop

& chipped navy nails.

the sound rising

from the chimney wasn't ours.

someone else's graduation party.

someone else's remember-that-day,

but i want you to have it.

i don't remember leaving,

just that you stole my car

& brought it back with geraniums on the dash.

come to south hadley

before november.

i am scared to be 20 & of not knowing you.

that night you crashed your car—

i'm sorry.

i always forget you live in a human body

& it scares me to remember.

careful, please,

i hear the roads are wet.

**echo tries writing a letter instead after reading two
different articles about black holes**

article i.

i am trying out a new theory this week:
 everything matters
 and we are in the year
 the sun quits:

when all

~

this

~

becomes all that it was:
 inconceivable light and holy un-sound,

remember, younger:
 if a tree falls? i'm listening now.

thought: if all that survives me is the noise i make...

louder, now?
 or quieter,
 more steady,
 word choice,

seek out things to say.
 think shark teeth, think sea glass,
 how you can only hold so many of a precious thing in your palm.

but not just the pretty things,
i meant that *everything*.

fill my hands with sea fleas and coquinas;
i'll carry them to the water just the same,
somewhere no-reflection deep,
only the dark and what it makes of the light.

the water is in me, for now,
 (until it is not and neither am i)
i live in a world with no moon
 and i have chosen this.

consider the tide, differently now.
where will it go when the pulling stops?
elsewhere, maybe,
 but i hope wherever you are.

article ii.

i am trying out a new mindset today:
 i don't want any of it.
the reckless legacy of breathing,
 that incoherent motion of time.

some days
it's good to know, the forward step of it all.

ever watch a clock until you panic?
realize you're losing
something in the sound?
 it is a disappearing that takes time,

& some days my body
is the moment the ticks turn too loud
& some days this body
is something i don't even want even though
 it is soft & good & kind to me
 (maybe, the problem)

how do you explain blindness to light?
how do you tell someone you're dying when you're not
right now?

but some days,

spring comes often enough to worry about
&
today i tried to think about
my body
the way i think about
your body

&
i cried in my car for ten minutes.
this is still a love letter, i think,

but maybe something else entirely.
a promise:
tomorrow?
tomorrow.

this feels so simple:

you leave the poem half-eaten & sticky in my palm.
i try to lick it off & it's not there so

i spill honey-mouthed across your neck.
i spend my nights in someone else's mouth.

analytic ordering:

-roses
-roses
-roses—

what is this an example of?

i ate an entire tube of your lipstick trying to figure it out.

it's a disappearance that takes time.

you push & my arm splits open on the bathroom sink & it is
water & red,

& some summer boardwalk ice melting
strawberry syrup & wet,

& i am in florida; i am six years old
& i am not, i am twenty & you're saying sorry &

the stairs are not a dream, they happen, & they are right now.

i feel like i do need to tell you:

- the first time he had a gun,
- the second, she had fingers & a tongue.

you had been told before i told you.
i really wanted to not like you for it.

sometimes, this is an elegy, but it hasn't always happened yet.

timing:

the body happens in small, unimaginable ways,
like being born without a pancreas or
drowning in the housatonic river,

-or you,
-or you,
-or you not dying before montana, before senegal, before
your mother making lotion in the kitchen, rubbing it
across my hands like
a stone.

time thickens into a deep pink.
a year has passed since you found my eyes good enough
to take me home.

so here we are, opening like apples in a claw-foot tub.
i swallow the seeds of it, wanting to grow something for you in me.

we make handpies out of frozen raspberries,
pretend sunburns and salt while the snow snaps the arms
off of pine trees.

i know, you'll probably marry someone else
& learn to build birdhouses.

for now, i show up to your room with eggshells in my hair.
we comb them out together &
you keep the yolks in a jar with flakes of salt & rosemary.

someday, something will hatch
(or we'll bury it in the woods behind your house).

until then, i can give you this:

i woke up this morning to clean flannel sheets,
to the sun turning it all blue outside
to the radiator stopped, the window left open,
to a warm dream in massachusetts.

accident:
we wake up & it's june.

pink water

draping over your shoulders.

i'm watching it drip. my pulse
wets.

i'm trying to mouth it.
god is simple, maybe:
bathtubs,

your navy nails on porcelain
lowering your body into
the liquid of the afternoon.
my tongue on your palm
wicked, tastes
like lilacs do—
expected.

the blood in my neck keeps
bringing up that cream-colored dress you
took off so slow,
now hung over the door,
turned
any other color in the dark.

its satin phantoms &
i welcome the haunting,
everything made pink
in the light rushing
as you ruck up your knees &
pull me into the flushed water.

this is part of it,
i know.
this is the part that is easy
& explicable, like your mother's
soft jaw & your black lipstick, like

eating vegan chicken salad

on wheat thins
scattered on a plastic plate
on the side of the bathtub.

this is the part beside/before
the body and what it takes,
so disloyal to what it owns
it keeps the cancer-kind of secret,
letting you live
within the not knowing as it grows.

the foundness of it:
two months of blood & your hands go white
then blue, & the mind takes what it wants
& leaves.

sometimes the color changes
when i remember it, but
it doesn't:
white and pink still.
walking home in february,
wanting nothing but what it meant to be
warm then,
your shoulders.

appetite to rest

there's a baby in the body of someone you used to be
and this is not at all what i am trying to say.

instead: frozen waffles,
water in my lungs,
sugar and white petals,
june bugs crawling out of our mouths,
a reminder of the pretty in us:
florida child, salt spit.

we had matching bathing suits but did not plan it.
i did not like the bathing suit,
would have rather gone shirtless,
or been able to go shirtless,
but it became something else on you.

swimming:
i watched your hair move beneath the surface,
alive and growing.

you could hold your breath for minutes.
you were magic, maybe,
but only until the water went cold,
then you were once again
mortal, craning
goose-necked for a spot of sun.

then wrapping our bodies in towels from the dryer,
snapping aloe, peeling off skin with pruned hands.

you left and i ate clam chowder out of a ramekin.

that night, i died six times in a dream,
but each time i did, i realized i didn't.
somehow, fifteen years go by.

i hear you're moving into a two-bedroom house,
naming the baby something soft.

i imagine it this way: a swimming pool with confederate jasmines
growing nearby. wet mornings. june bugs. butter cookies.

you, glad, and the baby has your hair.

ars poetica

this is a question, the thing i almost saw thawing.

i am looking for you in all the things you've been: daffodils, ice cubes,
a kitchen knife curling ribbon.

i think saying "i love you" may be a compulsive gesture.

i love you.

everything is matter. we can only see the result of it, make it true by
saying it out loud. (truth is something someone told us when we were
younger, like love and dandelions, just a little less honest).

here is a sequence: the blue the world becomes when you close your
eyes at the sun. snow falling on the soft spines of our open mouths. a
tangerine in your left hand, all the rings i've lost and where.

this is me taking something for you. consider this the tangerine,
halved. consider this me climbing the tree it came from. consider this
my hands weaving through the branches to reach it—

this is the problem of being a person:
i can never be sure whether my life will be like food or stone,

but i am going to say it anyway; i am afraid of not knowing.

acknowledgements:

in *crab fat magazine*: “echo tries writing a letter instead after reading two different articles about black holes”

in *spilled milk*: “ars poetica”

in *tinderbox*: “fledge” and “seven pines”

in *voicemail poems*: “it is raining in new england”

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photo credit: michaela butin

katie clark is twenty years old and from the south. currently, katie studies anthropology and creative writing in the pioneer valley. they have worked with as220 and vagabond city lit in order to take part in conversations around what it means to make/be/participate in an artistic community. this is katie's first collection.

*this is the problem of being a person:
i can never be sure whether my life
will be like food or stone*

Katie Clark's collection is a fierce journey into gender and sexual identity. They say, "I wake up with your body my body" and "I was a boy until I wasn't a boy." These lines are absolutely what we need right now. The collection is self-conscious about its own body and explores what it means to fall deeply into the abyss of others' bodies when you are barely living in your own.

—Joanna Valente, *Marys of the Sea*

The poems of *our own soft* refuse to protect us from sharp edges as we unravel their secrets in the low light of unsleep. to move forward we rely on remembered litanies, associating to make ripples. is this nostalgia or something else invented to stand in its place? Clark writes, "it doesn't always happen in the order that it happened," then throws the past in the air like confetti / like releasing a hive of bees to hunt for what is sweet, stinging as they seek the honey out.

—Emily O'Neill, *Pelican*

