

Kristel Rietesel

Rainstorm (Pineapple Express)

It begins
like a time zone division: one day
wind slips through a cracked door or window,
suddenly slamming the other side
of the house

to winter. The live oaks disappear
to a froth of white, clouds
against mountain, hood
against cheek. Pulled
into the inevitable,

plucked from a vastness of blue,
green leaf to white inversion
by wind that batters the bottlebrush,
banana leaves, fan palms,
bird of paradise. Rose hips

overflow the arbor in bitter red
in rain that drives shifting curtains for days
and lashes the remaining roses nodding through the window,
soft pink cabbages on a rainy wind,
sending the infant into ecstasy

at every gust, until she sleeps in a darkness
like a petal pressed against dark humus
the next morning. Almost
Solstice, the mountains
begin to reappear, thick, heavy strokes

through the fog, bottoms first, followed by
a blue belly sunning itself on a garden stake pulled sideways
through the softened earth, proof
of the end of something before we can even know
an exact next beginning. In the foothills, above,

just beyond, a harrier hawk hangs on an air current
above sunlight in the grass. Pulling its wings
in to alight, it rises and falls, talons trailing, sewing itself
to the same spot over and over, to the idea
of what it means to be here.

The Bath

The turtles suddenly startled
where I grew up, helmets reflecting
and falling into darkness at late afternoon
under the yellowing willow
where we watched, my daughter and I,
the tugging of swale water lilies. Her own dark summer body
submerges against the brightness of bathtub: black-
fingernailed claws, everything
but the top of her head—oily skin smelling
like spoiled milk or bitter yogurt—then even that
gone, eclipsed: the blackness of dirt,
the smell of her body. As the heaviness of winter
ripens, like black mussel shells
tugged loose from the tides
lying collected against the oak floor.

In our research
a mountain stream appears.
Somewhere in the Appalachians,
on a Friday afternoon, a freezing December day
against the flesh-colored, leafless trees,
college students breaking the creaking ice
against time; now we learn about threat
instead of plenty, eons
against years. The freshwater mussels
Lampsilis orbiculata, turned circles,
freezing ears plucked from fresh water
east of the Mississippi
from the earth underwater,
freed from silt and tiny rocks, each
feeding in its own darkness beneath the deadened world,
the mussels' hidden insides like her underside of dulled sunlight
against shelled bathtub of absolute white.

Already she has become her own scientist
picking through whatever has been carried
downstream, collecting, identifying,
trying to understand
the reasons for everything—
which butterflies come to the garden, how
mosquito larvae pull themselves from spilled water,
where her voice goes

after letting it into the gathering blue
of evening sky. Like feet searching
for stability against a current,
navigating which neighbors ignore or wave back
from windows—the afternoon sun yellowing leafless oaks
on hilltops through the window, afternoon shadows
that continue to evolve
until darkness, as they wrap
and blanket her body as it rises like cream
to the surface.

Kristel Rietesel's work has appeared in or is forthcoming in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Plainsongs*, *Shenandoah*, and others. She received her MFA in creative writing from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.