

Norman Mailer College Poetry Writing Award

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Marymount Manhattan College '17**

Mother Riding Death in My Sleep

after Wangechi Mutu

Been three weeks now since I thrust a black pen into my eye socket.
Don't know if I'm planning on inscribing a new way of seeing

or excavating for lost memories. Wine sloshes at my feet.
Glass wherever I touch. Small, pulsing white jellyfish hover

above my head, and my mother, a still reflection,
holding a trident like she has just murdered Poseidon.

Then my mother as Lady Triệu, a purple feather in her hair
slicing twice as much sky as it should. She wields a sword

but has nowhere to stick it. She conjures a ripe mango, shaves
the velvet skin off with a single red-clawed finger. Squeezes

until sap swallows her hand, inching over skin until it reaches
white silk. *I'm ready to fight your men*, she says.

I tell her I've got no men. She takes my hand as her weapon.
We walk along the coast of Đà Nẵng and the water recedes.

Supple

béo like a stolen bottle of milk béo like two
pairs of aged converse high-tops béo like your
brother's clacking elbows béo like the black
mud that received you béo like the hair that
escapes you béo like pregnant dragonflies on
your shoulder béo like the time you fell into a
river béo like your jeans on the mauve carpet
béo like salty edamame on steamed rice béo like
your grandma painting her face each morning
béo like her own resurrection long after her
Christ had died

This is Not an Aubade

This is not an intervention. This is not the fast flood
of sunlight across your blemished face. This is not
the sound of juvenile knuckles against hardwood floor.
This is not the white screen door catching your elbow,
as if it knows of your flight. Not your bare feet
meeting gravel. Not your legs snaking along the sliver
of shade offered by brown garage doors. Tread
with caution. This is the fearful hush of morning.
The healing required after the moon's nighttime
spells. The steam ascending after the birth of new land.
When you've danced to the end of the driveway,
you see a faded stop sign looking like a wilted peony.
Your brother calls your name from behind you
and it sounds like an incantation. You turn against
the breeze and follow his voice, your cheeks gleaming
with what you might have lost.

Birth of A New Death

When I was born, Ông Ngoại slapped the word *Đen* on me,
laughed until his breath was sharp. When he died,
there was the doctor in a coat of lily petals, there was my
grandfather, the color of burnt cardboard, his face taut
and shiny. He was brand new. A victory in flesh. I imagine
that his punctured, smoke-filled lungs were home
to other things—salt, forgotten names, an orange shard
of sunlight. Beside me was his daughter, who weeped
until her lap was a constellation of black stars
against purple sky.

family portrait

my thumb fit perfectly on their faces,
ridges matching the *impasto*.
i wanted flat and smooth and raw
yes.

i flicked the white onto their willing bodies,
as if i could scrub the brown skin
with a pocket-sized bottle of *wite-out*.

circled each face—a fresh wound.
a gaping mouth,
two smooth black pearls.

grandmother, aunt, uncle, cousin.
me.

the white ink sang in bubbling fissures,
calcified like white cliffs,
superimposed.

after their heads were circumscribed
and the white had bled onto their faces
i sit back and think:
much better.

when my dad understands what i've
done, he takes my hand.
we bounce down the cemented hill
in slow motion.

he smiles enough for the both of us.
the wind
lapping our cheeks.

Dismembering

The Me that howled out the car window, a gust
scraping my cheek, a quickened ember, arithmetic
grace, the number of gods it would take before the
beating began. Did the heart have a Sister? Was her
name River? Standing at the top of the stairwell

like a velvet star? Each jutting limb, a whistle that
birthed me a Delta, backstroke, wading through a
smoke that stole my name, my chin a sliced
grapefruit. The Me that she couldn't save. As if she
was just

the catastrophe, the fire engine, the loping rivulet.
The faint was a fall into mercury. You weren't
asleep. The concrete was a silver mirror. You folded
yourself into

a paper airplane is all. Your arrow-throat. You called
her Sister when you should have called her M_e.

i am no apsara

in oahu, i paddle across cerulean then silence my knees. lift my arms like someone had filled them with sand. call *help*. a deluge in my waiting mouth. i had flirted with so many tides already. i just wanted to see someone swim for me, wanted to watch them reach into wetness for my short salvation. a long-haired cousin wrests me from the water with her thick pubescent arms. i am a spindly sea star by her waist. i gasp for the air i already had.

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my younger brother is an ostrich terrorizing me in this dream. i am running away from him, across a white field, where the weeds are white shadows. i am not fast enough. when the ostrich descends upon me, i feel a hand on my right temple. the arm dives into my eye socket, which is now a cavernous well of ink. when the hand emerges, my eye materializes and it is blue. i realize the hand was mine.

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i wave the spoon like a glimmering flag before striking it against the smooth gray egg. chips of the shell flicker, float into the tiny cavity i had made. when i peer in the hole, the smallest duck embryo and the rubbery yolk. *shhh, he's sleeping*. i excavate anyway, soon learning that i am allergic to eggs. at the sight of my blossoming lips, mother tosses me into the gray tide. when the rain begins, the whole world is a sheet of glass. i am devoured.