

Speed of Life

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Brisance

for Tamara Verga, 1970-1990

We are still trying to turn the doorknob on the back porch of the smoke-filled house, choked thoughts of dark, fresh air outside, opened books of poems by the sofa on which you fell asleep. Picture something other than: not unwrapping the package of death, not crashing through the car window at eighty miles-per-hour, not falling in the wells that don't exist. If we've never believed weather reports or traffic reports, we don't intend to start now. *Now* is its own wound—what came before was really what was going to happen, this opening up so you can die, closed up tightly forever, the last thrill of drilling deep into earth, some spiral of memory, somehow remembering a way back down the ladder you reluctantly climbed. You've lost your footing, and the pears stay overripe at the very top of the tree. But how to get them down when the tree grows so high? *Nothing* is easy. It's the *something* we have a hard time making happen. You had not been building a twenty-year-old coffin. You didn't give wood and nails the gravity they wanted. The sad nest the cats tore apart is covered with snow. Perhaps only the dead see the brilliant light the living make when they die. A poem's white page is torn in two. What is the rate at which we separate from this life? You, lying on the floor, dead. You, sitting in the chair, alive.

Subito

My father tells me he wants to go quickly: in the midst
of tipping the bottle back, while completing the U-turn,
after defrosting the turkey in the kitchen sink. He'd
rather not linger, Death's finger pointing him out in
the line at the post office, and he'd have to wait
for hours to reach the front. The wick burns where
the flame is. He wishes that his watch would
start its alarm, slice open his left wrist, and do
a quick countdown, but he knows that his body's
business is to manage to breathe, and it would flood
the market with self-preservation. My father has had
a shelf life of eighty years. He's the bottle in
the cellar given half-turns every six months. He's had
a leg crushed, a lung collapse, and a face smashed.
His feet curl up in the fire he has imagined starting
in himself, using what he reads each night, *The Joy
of Death*, for kindling. He's split up his insect
collection, and now it's worthless. Only his
footprints are the signs that he's going. He wants
a big truck to break through the gates of hell. He carries
a body bag in the glove compartment, an effigy of
himself in the trunk. He has turned health into death,
every breath is gunning the engine, watching the fuel
gauge feel itself go empty. It's his age, the nightshade
he sprinkles in his teacup, the way he can twang a string,
and the vibration is enough to send the undertaker over,
pulling a trailer of coffins, and a word processor full
of sample eulogies. My father rides the nightmare to
the farm he lost, the farm that burned down, a big
sickle slicing the wheat of his memory. If it were
done, it were to be done quickly, the big quit of life,
the heart attack at the front line, no defensive action,
no camouflage, flak jacket, no bandages, no pain
pills, no interruption from the sweet swift act of death.

Rapid Fire

In the photograph of our seventh grade basketball team at St. Stanislaus, I am standing next to

Bruce Pomeroy, who did not die six years later in Vietnam but in a car crash one year after

returning. He had been on his way out. He had done most of the common *spires*, from *as* to *per* to

re, and his run on the spiral ran down. The second hand on the watch he had been wearing went around

and around, like his father on the construction site tamping the steaming asphalt, giving the road a

surface we often walk upon. There's not enough of Bruce Pomeroy now to say much. He was a random

variable, a last stat on the late news. He was taken away by a fleet of flying saucers, something like

the kind he used to shoot at on Saturday mornings. His mother's tavern was the last place I got

blind-drunk. The war was just a parabola to us then, something thrown aside, some backpack abandoned

in a place we knew we'd never return to. Bruce Pomeroy didn't read the dictionary so didn't know there are

three pages of words beginning with *self*. This wouldn't have helped his self-esteem. We had been on some kind

of verge. It was night. We had been working all
day as arc welders. When his car broke through
the ice as he was spinning away from the car
he was racing, that I was driving, he had had
the windows open, and the Mississippi River simply
closed up over him. We had both been shifting
into fourth gear, at least. Now that some of that water
has gone underground, a river Styx rubbing
the faces off stones, I think that the only racing
in an iced-over river I've done is done. Every
five years the river is dredged for channel,
a chance that someone will go continually downstream.