

Submission for the Rowan University Award for Poetry

Snapshots from the Field

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Euphorie

Je t'aime.

I'm here, city.

Hear that?

It's my heart beat

catching up to the syncopation

of your

Peugeots, your

hip-hop, your

haughty obsession for *haute*

couture and cultured Camembert.

I'm still here.

Am I? I think – *oui*.

I'm awake.

Croissants and silence

waft in with the morning wind.

Godard at nine,

Renoir at noon.

Rendezvous with de Gaulle

for *chocolat chaud*

in the café across Invalides.

I chill,

I bounce,

I down

Pinot on the metro.

Tequila in the Quarter.

Pocket-beers on the boulevards

with imbibed teens.

3 a.m. now. Night's young.

Snow Day with my Father

The hill looked smaller than I remembered.
Weaker. The tracks, of course, had
long since melted. New powder now
packed on the cold grass. Sons and fathers
returned with their sleds and
galoshes, recalling a Kinkadian
coziness that for me died that day,
today, ten years past.

How we had howled, our mouths muffled
by the thick wool, you up front,
me wrapping my arms tight at your
waist. We shimmied and the snow
gave way. The sled picked up pace
but we hadn't seen the ramp some
children had built. Our two-seater shook
and we soared, floating, frozen –
then impact. A cascade of frost crackled
around us. My grip slackened; you
held me by a slippery sleeve. But we
threatened to capsize and you broke
your grasp. I had no time to look
into your eyes. I fell, rolling, my knees
scrapping along ice patches while you
clamored to keep me in, keep me safe.
I lost you then, in the trough of the hill,
in a tailspin. All that was left of you
was a streak of red whooshing out of sight
and your echoing howls.

Maybe your lumbering form would emerge
from the white, take my hand and
ask me if I was okay.

And maybe after we would make angels,
laugh ourselves silly on the hike home
and sip cups of marshmallow cocoa
in the company of a roaring blaze.

Only – only the ramp was not a ramp,
and the sled was not a sled,
and it was I who let go, and you
who tumbled, leaving me to disappear
into the grey and skid safely to the forest's
edge, panting, windburn, brushing snow
off my scarlet face as it fell around me,
like ashes.

My Mother's Eyes

I've been told I have
my mother's eyes – two vivid
pivots to her soul.

I'm haunted by her;

woken by my memories
of her fatal love.

I was left alone,
ignored by all around me,
waiting to be found.

And one day I was.

I gained a new family –
fond and honest friends.

They've saved me in life
as did my mother in death.

I'll soon pay my debt.

An uncanny bond
echoes from Mom's last twilight
to my last moment.

I stand here shaken,
fierce pride rushing up my heart;
loyal to the last.

Time to take the plunge.

I pray to Mom. Thank my friends.
And face the beyond.

The veil of death now.
But I'm not leaving alone...

Mom's eyes lead me home.

Fall of an Animal in the Wild

Once upon a time
I heard a doe get shot on television.
The Technicolor fawn had toppled
to and fro in the foliage
and lay maimed for her boy to abandon.
I must have been struck, too:
in shock, pooling up, pockets
of hot liquid searing as it splattered
cheek and neck and hand,
staining a face that failed to turn away.
No red was drawn
but it drained in my mind, numbed
as the fawn's irises grew wider
in her eyes until she was asleep.
I cursed the unseen men, those men
who kept me frozen in bed at night,
maimed and numbed and innocent
no more.

Years passed.
Memories faded.
Real life refocused.

I snapped tight the lab coat
and stood next to my professor.
His face was fixed, movements slow, stalling.
He pointed and I held the neck,
pressed the stomach, bent the legs,
moved fingers out of biting range.
The professor plucked the wing
feathers to expose the ripe vein.
Alcohol was rubbed and a needle drawn
in an act of sterilized mercy.
Then in a sear of silver the shot
rang out and struck, injecting
within the ruptured bloodstream
Pentothal that rushed for the heart. The beat
quickened. The avian body convulsed
to and fro on the table
as the tongue grew heavier, twitching
in its open mouth until it was dead.
I stood still and cursed myself, myself
who maimed and numbed,
innocent no more.
Then I pried off the bloodstained latex,
washed my hands and turned away.

Impressions

Her young son shifts his sneakers
 in the West Main gallery and sighs,
 a corduroy cap held limp at his side.
 And the pretty mother to the left,
 a dripping umbrella draped over
 her cashmere-cloaked shoulder,
 peers passed her boy through the crowd,
 who follows her gaze a quarter turn
 and glimpses, under cool halogen lights,
 a linen canvass on a whitewashed wall.
 The contours of skirt and windswept flowers
 impressed within the painting illuminate
 in the pure light like oil prisms.
 The mother gasps and grasps her camera.
 Through the lens eye the scene comes alive,
 and she's transported in time and place
 from D.C. to Argenteuil.
 Wildflowers swung in the spring wind,
 fair *en plein air*
 as Camille was fair in the shade
 made by her cobalt umbrella.
 She graced an opaque Victorian dress
 which, with her dulled brown hair,
 flowed round her figure in the gusts,
 conjuring waves of cloth and mane
 that carried ever-on in seamless form
 into the field beside her.
 And Camille's young son to the right,
 a Huckleberry hat upon his head,
 peered passed his mother and her grass-shadow.
 She followed his gaze a quarter turn
 and glimpsed, between her wispy bangs,
 beyond the hill to the painter,
 who had dropped his brush and gasped.
 The mother floats from her reverie
 and captures the snapshot.
 Her boy clicks his bubblegum
 and checks on the time,
 ready for their ride back on the Green Line.

The Journey

We parked across from the Windmill, my father and I, in Belmar.
 The Viaticum II tied to its dock beyond the lot.
 The marina dead; my breath drawn in the nippy morn.
 The old gang waited by benches at water's edge –
 my two cousins and two uncles. A round of handshakes.
 My Uncle James's cold fingers trembled in my palm.
 Silence fell among the six of us.
 Today was special. Our first fishing trip together.
 We transferred our poles and pails to rugged deckhands
 and climbed aboard as the boat readied to set to sea.
 Uncle James clapped and limped over to me.

The small ship whipped through the mid-November wind.
 We stood aft, jackets tight, casting fingers prepared to fire.
 The motors cut three miles off Asbury's coast.
 We baited our hooks and set our reels. Uncle James let go first.
 The rest of us followed. Six rods snapping – six strings sailing –
 over the waves. The lures broke the surface
 and like musicians to a maritime violin – we played.
 Viaticum II trawled the depths in search of blues and stripers.
 Uncle James, ghostly pale, smiled at my side. Hours passed.
 Sometimes we went in the cabin for food or warmth.
 At noon we held a game of Hold 'Em
 and waxed nostalgic on good times past.
 Then Uncle James clapped and leaned on his cane.

In the afternoon it rained. We had black ponchos but didn't use them.
 Uncle James enjoyed the wet air –
 enjoyed all things God had given him.
 A knot formed in my stomach then; a wave of nausea.
 Suddenly, feelings came rushing up inside of me
 as the boat was rushing down the crests.
 I looked at his reflection in the wake below;
 the gaunt face of a man who had lost much in a short time.
 Holding on by faith and fishing. A weight off his shoulders.
 The damn damp meaning nothing to him.
 Not reminding him of the coming funeral.
 Our first fishing trip together. And also our last.
 None of us had a catch that day.
 We disembarked at 5 p.m. – darkness pending –
 and packed the poles and pails. A round of handshakes.
 Silence fell and no one moved.
 Uncle James cupped his weak hands and stared at the sky.

Swan Lake

I saw a fair swan bare her soul tonight,
When wandering tangent to theatre doors,
The spotlight's moon eclipsed by the fowl's flight,
Whose healthy form no man of science ignores,
She was in white with arched legs in lace streams,
Like helices encoding motive grace,
I pictured her pirouette in my dreams,
And my mesmerized mind fought to keep chaste,
But a nest not a lake was where she should be,
Said my studies in swan mating technique,
Passions for wing-stroked duets flowed through me,
This avian angel plied my heart weak,
And tears on my cheek I pray to above,
Let I be a swan! And long shall I love.