Five Poems
JAMES LONGENBACH

The Two Together

I rarely thought about the others;
How they nestled beside us, unhurried
As persimmons dangling from the trees. Beneath us

Swollen marshes, bristling sedge.
The hammock stretched each night
To hold us so it seemed

We never grew. We touched
Our eyelids to our fingertips

To feel weeds against our thighs.
We looked to the sky
As if we'd come from nowhere

Or a house where each desire has a different room—
Each membrane matched with what would
Startle, then grow soft,
Dissolving while we slept.

We slept for years, collecting
Tastes, a tickling
From beneath our skin that could be answered only

(We imagined) by ourselves;
A dream in which existing is to want

And wanting to receive—the burden
Of not knowing the event
Beyond which nothing more will happen

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Forever relieved.
We lifted ripe fruit from the grass,
Filled baskets, added rooms

And once the rafters were in place
We rarely raised our heads to look around.
But they were everywhere. I felt them

As we touched each other, running
Through the orchard after dark.
The Kearny Marshes

Here, freeway
Overhead, I furrowed, heaved
Black silt to the surface, reeds: here

The green strands of spartina.
Carp thrashing violently as if to climb on top
Of one another, here, or
Here—

I saw the bottom clearly.
Great trunks lying on their sides,
Pediments, dismantled columns

Stained by many hands;
And in the never to be repeated moment of
Light's obliquity I saw
Two figures: day

And night, one draped
In flowers, looking forward, the other
Hooded, turning away—

Who gets to change?
Who gets the life

Imagined when we're young?
I'd seen myself in heaven, peering
Over the edge of a canoe; here—

Blank surface marbleized with green: facade
Of travertine still high
Enough to shield
The noon-time lull of smoke
Congealing lazily above rooftops
Like a sea, no cars,
No footsteps
In the street—ahead

Of me my older daughter having dropped
Her coat to shiver in the sun,

Her sister sleeping,
Pressed against my back.
What grows

Grows lighter, is
Distilled. I made a map

And lost it—lost
As any morning may be
Wished for, then forgotten.
Anniversary

Candlelight, a table of food. Outside
Wind brushing the palmettos.
You wandering, a child again, the one who walked
Into her future as if entering a ruin—
Columns, entablatures collapsing around you.
Then a distant hum, a roar: the Adriatic
On the other side, beyond
The drift, detritus of other lives.
Days, moonlit nights—we live our lives
Over again if we live long enough.
Rubble behind us, ocean beyond: here
The little town, brightly colored
Shacks, the bicycles, lemons ripening in the trees.
So many years ago. I’d brought
A picnic, bread and cheese: you ran
Ahead of me, I was hungry,
Experienced enough to wonder
What would happen next—
These nights, the flickering branches, even
When we walk alone, the light
—A wine glass, small
Fish breaded in their skin—
It has no opposite.
Acqua Alta

Air charged with sea-spray, gray-green water
Welling up through drain-holes
And beyond the levees

Shipwrecks, dolphins leaping
From wavetop to wavetop—exhilarating

But a waste: so much refuse unaccounted for and
(This was the annoying part) the source

Untouched—as if the mess
Were our responsibility despite
The fact that all we’d done was watch

What we were powerless to avoid.
Still, we’d enjoyed ourselves

And since it was bound to happen again
The question was not so much of cleaning up
As of learning how to take our pleasure

Somewhere else: acceptance
Of a different medium

Would allow what threatened
To dissolve the hard-won
Distance between desire and fate to be

Transformed—it didn’t matter into what.
First bits of the remaining world,
A cabbage-stalk, small chips

Of wood, then dolphins gamboling
Weightless through the trees.
Bellosguardo

To say the journey ends here
Would imply there was only
One path, almonds scattering petals
On the slopes below.
We climbed for hours but
Each glimpse of cultivated hillside was
Unfinished, incomplete;
We scanned the underbrush
For what we’d missed and sometimes
Found it, strayed—to say
The journey ends here
Would imply there was only
One person: almonds
Clinging to the branches into spring—a thousand
Narratives, some shared, some never
To be known, converging
In a landscape that by appearing
Undiscovered made the passage of time
Plausible: two children
Scampering across a backlit meadow
That we’d always known
But never seen; pinprick
Red of the poppies growing dimmer
In the groves beneath us and above
Small traumas flickering in the twilight, needing
Never to be explained.
Scar, the hurt of belonging
Or of standing apart;
The gift of what we’d always been
Bestowed unknowingly
On someone else—how far
We traveled to exist
Together in a field; how
Selfishly I loved when we were young.
When we first touched earth
I saw tiny drifts of snow
Beside the tarmac, almond trees.