

*Five Poems*

JAMES LONGENBACH

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*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

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 marbled 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.



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