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Claire Verbeck
cverbeck@wellesley.edu

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Caesura: A Collection

Claire Suzanne Verbeck

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in English and Creative Writing

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Caesura

One.

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2. Over what may be, but is likely not, the Mississippi
3. Da Capo
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5. Villanelle, unrescued
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Notes.

A Few Thank Yous.

One.

“And all my things look like someone else’s memories”

Forecast

Upright. Aisle fourteen. Juice.
Your vision like a vignette.
Shopping for Orangina, and—
horizontal.
Linoleum, hot and wet and sticky.
Red.
It's happened again,
in the goddamn supermarket.

As they wheel your stretcher into the ambulance, you laugh and realize you forgot the Orangina. The paramedic tells you to keep your head down, that your red shirt is probably ruined. *Those headwounds can really get going*. He puts another blanket on you; then he reassures the others that *broadcast T.V. is on the outs, folks!*

You spend the next two weeks with Ginger and The Skipper, and you don't pick at your stitches.

Over what may be, but is likely not, the Mississippi

Bottoms up, drop down
to the barns and baseball diamonds
we can barely see
She refuses to ask questions
as I explore the edges of the tray table
and wonder how she defines a “successful” date:
is it kissing?
or an imposed sense of awe?
or maybe just a free drink, even on an airplane
with a conclusive destination.

She learned that women don’t pay,
but we aren’t real women—
I’ll pay for her, this time.

Her pastor doesn’t need to know
what she doesn’t need words for,
the unpredictable prescribed routine
of hands clammy with doubt,
a nervous “goodbye”
and entangled curls,

better than braces.

Da Capo

The actress's silver hair glances out from under her hat.

A gloved hand reaches up, wipes the mud of sweat and dirt from her forehead. A slight sunburn behind, on her shoulderblade wings.

She looks down at her afternoon's work: bulbs, mulch, stones. Two neat iris gardens, yet unspoiled by children or dogs or weather.

In celebration, she puts a tube of aloe in the fridge, and prepares a highball of sweet sun tea.

Antebellum

This is a cold and murky 4 x 6
from our retired home, by
a broken AE-1, leftover from the canon
of junk our grandparents
finished using.

This is January-sharp,
the air where playground students
pretend to smoke twigs
while tunafish mothers sit in cornflower kitchens
with closed windows and filled trashcans
smells that won't leave
and curled posters of unknown forests.

This is moving forward
to a younger house
that never had slaves
or the pecan trees.

These are students, climbing.

Villanelle, unrescued

When we saw the city disappear
I knew the world had died
“here” became anywhere I could

Street signs, power lines
down the road I didn’t know
when we saw the city disappear

Off the bus, the driver told me privately
that anywhere we could, we should
after we saw the city disappear

And so we jumped
to hide in the rest stop bathroom
“Here” was all we could—

wherever it would be.

My city is disappeared.

Reconstructed

Last week, my sister called to tell me:

grassfire. 45 highway. 1500 acres.

the wind is blowing from the south.

it's not so bad, really. we'll be fine.

some buildings are gone.

The bottoms of my feet tingle. The old roadhouse.
We used to buy guppies there, from the
drunk who was always behind the bar.
It was dim.

they're in for a barren summer.

but the ash will really help the soil

next year.

Two.

“Still the voice starts when I open

my mouth, first it’s breath
then air then sky”

Collapse

A prior flood of pipe-burst blood:
When I was young

she talked about the collapse,
how his pants were
pink to the knees
with the life of the damned;
the Florsheim Wingtips
he couldn't wear again
or throw away.
Pledged to a basement hamper,
a final act of baptism:
she thinks they're still there.

These stories now exist
through watery words, rippling and
rewinding cassettes decaying
with every playback;
Rerecording history, filtering down
until the past is a murky pool
lost to my sisters, to
my replica vision,
a different underwater icon.

Hohner 1896

Beet-root brown
vibrantly alive
pocked with rings
and forceful nothings,
belonging to an overworked past
of changed names, steerage tickets
calcium winters naked in the sun

The days he worked, every day,
he would play on the train
for the playing children in seats
soccer balls under their feet
Tired athletes entertained
by the bashful only man who knew
what they meant by “ačiū.”

Zodiac

In the starlight gravel driveway
stands a man cloaked in obscurity.

His name eludes me.
The nights he visits
(frequently)
are sweaty and cold.

The first I knew him—
my sister's bedroom—
an urn of rusty petals
loomed next to our head

as he gave his hand
and a molasses *hello*.

Outstretched, his treacherous fingers
played my hands
caged in poise
with noises familiar and frightening.

I remembered
it began long before we did:

Moulting in parking lots,
a mind of ends impending;
losing the most basic control
in the driver's seat

of a news cruiser
that later carried us
every day from school. Cutting
cattails down highwayside

on drives for our sister
who would be a doctor.

Exhaling silence
in naked breaths from naked lips,

her spinning room is a zodiac.

BNSF

She hardly harbored his ardor
outside the shotgun-pocked cemetery walls
on Wednesday afternoons.

They profanely collapsed
together behind the cracked plaster and the train tracks
pressing hot pennies
beneath the wind of a boxcar.

Misty junipers burned along the tree line
parallel to the train rails,
her bony limestone limbs, and his.
Bulletholes, nearly parallel too:
a slight curve in the spray.

Splayed away from him, she exhaled in the grass and thought of a burning bus,
beautiful and bright.

The severe summer sun stuck
to the skin of her
back, a thick and heavy uniform.

He had missed those days,
their ragged armies.
His lone post felt like
enough to him.

Still
he must have lost
at least a dollar
tossed across the railroad ties

Fermata

The doctor asks, “what are you holding your breath for?”

She takes the syringe, and just as she showed her.

Slowly in, slowly plunge, slowly out.

He smiles.

“And to think my days of shooting up were over.”

Her empty lungs fill with laughter, and she pats away the spot of blood.

Comma

Left, right, left again
the shuttle slips beneath,
our loom begins
to weave a sheath

of belabored vision,
an exorcism,

Variations on a Dynasty

Driving down our streets,
your woods filled up with snow
between the details, the miles to go
I breathlessly notice your movement slowing
from when you first surfaced after the storm.

You stopped reciting Frost in the car,
but we were already in the thaw
and your wife had drawn up plans
to build a new butterfly feeder for the iris garden
we transplanted from your sponsor's leftover lawn.

I want to tell you
that during that week, I couldn't sleep
I couldn't tell if the changes in your voice
were wavelengths broken by the wind
or if the noise had cocooned inside you.

As your back hunches, I see your thinning hair
You seem shorter
So we sit instead in silence
staring out from the river bluffs
until you ask me to promise that you'll never be embalmed.

Migrating over Lake Superior,
Monarch butterflies fly a curve carved
by a mountain, millennia-gone
the way warped bloodlines uphold
the same narrow predisposed roads.

You whisper above the abandoned quay
that the same thing happened in New Orleans.

Finding afternoons patient enough to listen,
we sit and look out as you relay:
A blind man calling out in the floods
fearful of downed powerlines

in the Upper Ninth Ward.
You sigh and tell me

he couldn't swim
but merely sink
nor any drop to drink
at 3:00 a.m.
and surely died

Or the woman
with two babies and a telephone, water
everywhere to her chest
with a single request:
"Can you save our lives?"

Three.

“Your life is yours

It fits you like your skin”

Groceries, Without Incident

Susanna lives somewhere along the Rock Island District—
when I don't see her waiting for the train
she's pricing soups at Food-4-Less

I still read her nametag each Tuesday afternoon
but we have never said more than
two words to each other

Last time I went to the supermarket,
I was shopping for taco ingredients
too shy to see down past her plastic nametag.
Susanna, shy too, wouldn't look me in the eye

until she handed me my receipt.
I wondered if she had a someone
if she too told him "not tonight, I'm tired"
and what he'd known under her nametag

I thought she would drink up my soul like Kool-Aid
(on sale, 39¢/packet).

Amends

An open A.A. meeting is a gallery
of stories, told through skin
wrinkles in time
and inky needles carrying
triangles, months, names.

Recently, the members voted
to make Saturday night smoke-free.
All the upholstery still reeks
of stagnant smoke and burned Folgers
the ragged cushion holes weeping polyester
under the white light of the popcorn ceiling.

Everyone's hands, wrinkled. Blue veins twine around
smooth mug handles, styrofoam cups
clutching, itching, tapping
and eyes transfixed on the tall man
at the front of the room.

A midnight-blue prison tattoo
sits next to Mike's daughter
her birthday on his forearm,
a reminder whose gravity
pulls me closer to the podium
with intrusive questions
so he tells me
when he was using and fixing
cars, everything was fast.

He could be brilliant, fluorescent
thorough and precise in his mechanisms,
until he came down
and saw his wake:
frayed wires, loosely soldered connections
a sputtering engine that could barely turn over.

Before he leaves, only for a Lucky,

he sees his child,
a banana dress of taffeta under
seashell teeth.

When We Rise

A sink full of empty glasses
in the muddy morning
sunbaked to dirt beneath the windowsill.

In the half-light golden—
no, amber like molasses or wild
or turkey glass, crass and cracked
like a spiderweb, dewy and torn
across the tilled rows

in the smoldering sun,
the humble stream grows
still.

Next to the sink,
three empty handles
a toy car
a folded newspaper
an answering machine.

The light is blinking.

Like a broken faucet or bloody nose
the fading current slows—

Imagined Dialogue, in an Attic Near Bonart Playground

“I have a gallon of water and one can of baby formula. There are two men here with me and the two babies. The water is up to our chests.”

I have a hammer. I'll break the ceiling. Here by the wall where it's lower. On the roof, we can flag down help.

Here, come away from there. Don't want you to get hit by a splinter.

...

They're hungry.

I know.

...

Can you give me a hand with this?

Be careful.

My arm's getting tired.

Do you think it'll take much longer?

You got an axe in this attic?

If there is one, it's over with Charlie's old stuff, there in that corner.

I can't find one. Any progress with the hammer?

It's solid as a rock.

...

God, please.

Just keep on trying.

...

God.

Please, God.

...

Keep trying.

Coda

Kitchen table, Avenida Mañana.
Between controlled sips of gira,
he inquires
to the seven grandchildren—
“What did the mayonnaise say to the catsup?”

They know, and they grin noiselessly.

“Close the door.

I’m dressing.”

First Timer

Brackets hashes hyphens gashes in the colon bloody fingertips and hold-scratched thighs he can't stop itching, secrets cover his body, and his naughty boy mind of upskirts and exposure, Victor in the Blue Room classroom of children learning by experience when teachers aren't looking down by the water in the winter and the darkness of remembering places that are cut out along the dotted lines.

Again, an adolescent he pushes into her resistance to change, engaged to a dream of a queen-sized bed where she will have space to escape his grip. The nighttime, the light through the window from a moon fuller than her hands penetrates the fault lines on her hands legs and back. They glow, marble pink from inside, going back and forth from his nails to her lack of defenses knowing it won't be forever I don't think but wouldn't it be nice if it were? Spectacle Island in the summertime and teal harbors where the sky burns white when buildings end and above his head is Cerulean, the same color his aunt saw, her pupils clear and wet

Iris

Off the Ohio coast
sails a boat
of three gravel voices,
fifty-year friends
their little remaining hair
tufted by the Erie breeze.

None of them knows
the names of girlfriends
neighbors who moved off the block
teachers with baggy pockets.

The clouds are on fire—
a slow, deep blue burn

The burn of their singular voice
deeper, brighter:
Cities, alive.

Inheritance

The full-blown golden cheer
of bursting sunflowers and corn

the dark smell of dirty earth
tilled soft beneath our toes,

the sparkle of fertile fields
through a sixteen-hour sun,

all connect us to this summer land
the only way they can.

Planting seeds in the ground,
a revision of Babylonian botany:

their hanging gardens lushly green
and overwhelmed—

we're much less decadent here,
our gardens grounded in the earth.

Do you, sweet brother, recall our grandfather's past,
our tangled Russian roots?

How, throughout the siege,
he protected Nikolai's irreplaceable, edible seeds

to see them survive nine-hundred days
of freezing cold and hunger raid?

I stand with you to look in the waning light,
twin silhouettes against the horizon,

tall, frenzy-haired with arms akimbo,
though you always looked more like him.

A.M.

Six years old
watching a slanted bedroom ceiling,
three-thirty a.m.:

For company, I had
the gentle glow of the A.M. band
and the clatter of a careless favorite parent
preparing for work.

In the morning, we woke up
to his radio static
and my mother's blue-blood hand:
her scratched and tarnished wedding band.

When I ask about those days now,
he tiredly tells how
we kept him from going back *Out There*
and that a goodbye hug
before the morning news rush—
full of monsters and reality—
was better protection
than the comfort of a pint in his coat pocket.

But in my tiny mind,
unfettered at the time
by chemicals or confrontations
or the implications of genetics

I only wanted to convey
to his baggy, wrinkled eyes
that I knew he could scrape by
if only one more day.

He told me then and again
it was funny I'd had trouble
sleeping, because he did too.

Leaves

Leaves broom by the open window—
dogwood, boxelders, tobacco—
colors between the zipper lines
of rocky tarmac
and jackets breaking open in the mid-April wind.

Our car, bright white,
fills in the spaces:
we are everywhere.

Notes

“One:” A lyric misheard in the Mazzy Star song “Happy.”

“Forecast:” Ginger and The Skipper were two characters on the CBS television program *Gilligan’s Island*, which is still, fifty years later, widely syndicated on United States television.

“Da Capo:” “Da capo” is Italian for “from the head,” and is common musical notation to indicate a repeat.

“Antebellum:” Canon’s AE-1 was one of the most popular SLR cameras ever created, first released in 1976.

“Two:” Lines from the poem “Almost Song” by Nick Flynn, from the 2011 collection *The Captain Asks for a Show of Hands*.

“Collapse:” The Hyatt skywalk disaster occurred in Kansas City in 1981 and was, at the time, the deadliest structural collapse in U.S. history.

“Hohner 1896:” The Hohner Marine Band 1896 harmonica, first created in Germany, was a popular cultural conduit among central- and eastern-European immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century. “Ačiū” translates from Lithuanian as “thank you.”

“BNSF:” This poem co-opts several lines and images from the song “Spanish Bombs” by The Clash and the poem “Casabianca” by Felicia Hemans.

“Fermata:” A fermata is a symbol in musical notation indicating a sustain or hold.

“Variations on a Dynasty:” The poem borrows at various points from Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” The Beatles’ “I Want To Tell You,” and Robyn Hitchcock’s “Glass Hotel.” The unusual migratory patterns of Monarch butterflies were researched by zoologist Lincoln P. Brower at the University of Florida. He found that these butterflies, while flying over Lake Superior, significantly and briefly alter the trajectory of their flight. While many possible causes have been proposed for this erratic flight path, the most widely accepted belief is that a volcano once blocked this migration and that the insects fly as though it were still standing.

“Three:” Taken from the Funkadelic song “Good Thoughts, Bad Thoughts” from the 1974 album *Standing on the Verge of Getting It On*.

“Amends:” Steps Eight and Nine of the Twelve-Step Tradition are as follows:

Step Eight: Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step Nine: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

“Imagined Dialogue, in an Attic Near Bonart Playground:” The opening quote is the recollection of a phone call received by WWL-Radio, the only New Orleans radio station to continue operating throughout Hurricane Katrina. What follows is one interpretation of the potential conversation that followed, and the chorus of similar conversations that might have occurred simultaneously.

“Coda:” Italian for tail, codas are often used in musical notation to indicate a conclusion.

“Inheritance:” Nikolai Vavilov was a Russian botanist who created one of the world’s largest seedbanks. During the 28-month-long Siege of Leningrad, several of his assistants died of starvation while protecting the edible seeds.

“Leaves:” “And now we rise / and we are everywhere” is a line from the Nick Drake song “From the Morning.”

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