

Nina Puro

AND THEN THE ROOM FILLED WITH BIRDS

A girl walks into the woods. For *woods*
 read *room*, read *street*, read
stage. Our lives make
 loops around us. For *life*, read *wall*,
page, *bed*, *gender*, *language*. For
language, read *day*, *narrative*, *lie*.
 A swimming pool full of leaves;
 snow; water closing over
 a face, leaching history's
 poison. We're the sum of what
 we endure; our integers use
 of inheritance: a balance
 of seconds, girded by love
 and pain. In roughly equivalent
 weights, ideally. Cathecting. Both lie
 us down in dark rooms and have
 their way above us. Didn't we grift
 this rigged palace? Our folly wheeling,
 starlit, monetized? Days stack into
 bricks; what are you building? For
day, read *story*. For *story*, read *myth*, read
you, read *her*. Written language developed
 to track debt. An alphabet's a brand
 of math. To owe: to tally: to account
 for. A line pushing out—One gate:
 one hinge: one wall: one girl
 walking out of a forest. One girl walking
 up to a turnstile. She was a hum
 unnoticed until gone If a winter is a
 needle If the night was a mouth If
 there was smoke pluming out Where
 we flashed as headlights If the brother
 was sheared off If my sister poured through
 me *Love is a wound that opens and closes*,

opens and closes. Tonight, palm fronds reach
 for her name, overheard as one picks up
 the shape of a siren? possibly? on the far road, certain only
 as the pitch changes. As if the right word flicks
 a bulb: in that moment her name the delusion
 we could see our delusions simulcast at all angles,
 could know by sound whether the siren's flash is colored
 to stop or to save someone. For *name*, read *word*, read
solution, read *song*. Across Iowa beige sedans turn right, glide
 toward shag carpet and silence so palpable it hums. Air
 cooler, gold hour, your voice (*name*) a quiet thread of oil in the throat, a song
 from when we could still jam shards of italics
 together. A greasy question floats over local airwaves. Later,
 an answer gone rancid. OK. But what I can't get
 at is how it's all so much itself. This. Faces shade-dappled,
 as memory is. A wave foams in the mind of a single
 on loop last spring; a queasy longing (*hunger*) (*miasma*) pulses through
 the chest (*day*); candle-waxed sheet cake; the terminus arcing out
 of grasp perpetually; a buzzard hovers; the town
 an ecology of appetites, florid, fetid, brutal. Broken
 panes a rose window behind your silhouette. Slave
 cemetery overgrown with weeds. I'm pulling up; you're passing
 this soft evening shuttling between three small rooms.



I MAP A SHRINKING MAP

The sidewalks steam. Cut-with-a-knife air cut
 by the whomp of a siren, the sunflowers all nodding
 out. The word *sticky*, the word *blare*. The if *only*
 of survival sludged my mind—our baffled
 instinctive grasps to undo what's over, magic
 briefly more sensible than logic—his body
 walking back into his clothes, boats
 un-burning, etc,—fictive metal-and-snow air somewhere
 Dutch Master tungstened. Narrow
 streets like riverbeds or a woman shaking
 out her hair. Not this pockmarked grid:
 bells every fifteen minutes a pulse
 where all math's divisible by 60 & we're punched
 in eternally. I've grown sick
 of history. Not sleeping could be a symptom
 or the illness, touch a panacea or fever
 pitch. I feel a helplessly culpable, feel in the air
 for words as if a light-switch
 was graspable. (The word *sticky*,
 the word *blare*.) The trees move
 north in swathes. Peak season's
 over; tourists fled; ghosts piled in. He's gone. Yet our collective
 twilight, albeit impending, is exquisite; all of us candles
 swimming in jars of dark honey, dollar
 store plastic suddenly faceted. Windows
 domestic aquariums: couple slow
 dancing without music; woman alone,
 cooking; empty futon, blue fog
 of tv; man hunched over
 paper-bagged tallboy; a plaid back
 bent, turned—cleaning
 or searching. Our lives flex, point
 their toes. We're all bleeding
 through screens into each other. A white cloud

of moths roils above a four-inch shoot
 of mint budding where I pinched one leaf,
 transubstantiation banal & vicious. My legs
 churn viscous air and money. We snuff
 species punctually as our cigarettes. We
 smolder. It's quarter past;
 it's ten till. Ours is a savage, news-fueled
 mourning. What did we conclude when we could list waves of possibilities, subterra-
 nean & nocturnal & sure in our denunciations?
 1) a seam ripped 2) a frozen wheel 3) wet
 neon in rain. 4) Living is just the absence
 of death, thus always in relation. 5) Red
 is the best flavor. 6) Not everything is decaying faster than we can love it. I've burned
 my boats, stood on decks. Sometimes, alone in my darkened
 kitchen, I hold up a glass and thank the ghosts, never saying to them
What have we done?, never saying *Bear with me*,
 never asking for advice.

VOLUNTEER FOR KRTS

In your new place you need
only buy scallions once. A tumbler
of stems on sill above sink. Change
water. Only some harvests regenerate;
a bouquet's lopped limbs, not heart or root; "flower
food" formaldehyde. We're all drenched in static
and arias and blood; the stream's forever
swollen us soft. You can grow
an hour without fear pinging in. Go
change your setting. Here, local radio goes
silent often. I burn popcorn, let a scrap of me go
into the stream. My water's gone
cloudy, peonies sick with want. Our president
hurricanes in some new flood with
his thumbs. He grants an *us* or *them* no
solid ground. In hostile terrain, an uprooted
people regenerate spontaneously. In plants, that's
called *volunteer*. I don't know where sovereignty
ends or austerity begins but I've got the first streaming angle
of light in your kitchen. Where is it now? I've held bone
chips in three sets of ashes. I've tongued where a chip
of your tooth was. Where is it now? Some scraps
get planted face-up, others down. Framed pieces
should be moved face-to-face,
back-to-back. To tell the truth, I can't see
how we won't die floating in
opposite directions. I'll never have to listen
at the blue socket of your wrist for
silence. Through radio static an intern plays
two songs at once. Someone listening
combs knots from a child's red hair. Blue
dish-towels clipped to both our lines. What
was it you wanted from the water you last
poured off? Last floated in? It's said the flood

means optimal conditions for flourishing
are gone for us for good. To tell the truth, *you* are
proverbial. You're all of us gone
dark. I think a hairbrush can
be medicine, a peony a prayer. No human's
grown from me. Something green might.

FROM ABOVE

This room's a long way from when I was the ice
blue shadow pooled inside a center
of gravity I left in the shape
of a body Shivering made
its own music Sirens chipped
bits from our borders Looped guts
were a harmonica Don't say we've nothing
to live for We are I go
back twenty kitchens
ago, stare out In my sleep Our skins rotate
toward sun A president is a boat
we didn't pay for We don't choose
to get on My mouth an
archipelago Your bones a school
of fish A country what won't unyoke
slicked in our floating rib That hook
shine's a lit kitchen from a frost-hard
road Built by slaves The smoke
of the world is never still My stomach full
of twigs cracking I mean I'm filling out
the forms Her bones glow under
ground The foxes are back Everything
might spill Sorry am I talking
too quiet too fast too [] A body drained
of a name again A name spilled
milk again Paper money We age stringing chair
to chair under florescence Office ER
laundromat Thus silver ripples
through generations You're just
another year moving through
like a cold front I'm just another name
for meat Last year crouched
under the newish war and chugged

WHATEVER, NOBODY LISTENED TO CASSANDRA EITHER

A veranda held the ruined hotel reluctantly in the wet
season. Dry days passed like a skipped beat playing

inside each now-shuttered room I once declared
I never wanted to leave. Years in us flap unfiled
but out here they're hotel towels on a line, fixed,

each crumb & bleach-glug making the earth sicker. Turn
on the radio. Let's dance. It is said I carry my dead

father in my knuckles. In the truck our parallel
realities slid apart. When people said no way out
but through did they mean to move through

a veranda or through a magazine or through
an afternoon? It is said as a person walks through

mist or a moon through haze a dead man passed
through me. I think thinking he visited
is just wanting. Our clamor requires streams

of monarchs go to rust. When I want, I think of
milkweed. A dead trunk will sprout

new shoots. We'll tar them. The pills
aren't working. You carry light
under your sweater. With us, am I the

fog or the moving-through? Both die
after moving in opposing directions. I'll never have to

listen at the blue vase of your wrist
for silence. Out in the drab vistas

indexing our future insignificance, I'll push my will until

as wind must push, or be only air. Each breath
shoves out specks that'll propel fires in rooms

I'll never enter. Now under the curtain of diesel
streaming from the freeway, our bodies tangled
music I lost the words to as a child; everything

smoldering from within. We render. I will travel
to the hushed edge of a bad war. I will force

my left hand over the sun,
then add my right. Clouds will
keep streaming through our teeth until—

SOLVE FOR X

That night the moon a boat, a butcher's thumb. You
were a blinking motel sign. I was the hold of a flooded ship.
The house behind us backdropped the flickering intensity
of a nightmare. Crows hovering; cedar smoke. Hollyhocks,
milkweed. Seams of pitch popped. Then bright aisles & crops
writhed under a blunt gulp of sleep
while summer compressed to locust whir & race
riots, a mosquito-fog headache. The protracted greasy arc of my
country a drag, tedious—another stranger's clammy hand,
my thigh. Certain themes recur, economic:
exchange X for Y. Oil, labor, sugar. Pigment, fib,
floating rib. Present flushes into future, fuses. Years raw
silk in my fingers, thumbled but too costly to be
inside for my kind. Years spent drinking light
beer in casinos. Funeral hands, burial
skies. Futures pre-perforated, circumscribed: girded
with the voltage of girls' mouths as lurid bulbs lined
up by the dozen. The map stippled with Xs
we signed instead of names, Xs instead of
eyes, XXX replacing the line or swing
shift or foundry for virtue of being XY. Our mouths identities,
sentences. My lips cracked. Our drought season. Graveyards in
our throats, our walls, under our roads. The dead murmur
to each other, but we can't hear them over the fridge's
pneumatic swish. Our air seething, pressurized. A glass
of water quivers, a radio snaps off. The dead keep trying
to give us dreams that go full circle on a story never round
or smooth. It ripped jagged holes in other lives. Your eyes
smoke blooming into a cloud in me, then a thunderhead
crackling into storm. My face in the warped mirror garish,
inexplicably hardened and childish. We lose memories
one by one, not in the cold swipe
of comprehension. My life un-draws my life. Fall sun a grimy
halide bulb. We're swathed in a wariness

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that will not settle, dust over the stockyards.
We will not settle. We seethe. The war drone bells
with the laughter blooming from the terraces
above us—ivory draping a thin-veiled, frantic
ad for wealth—the kind they’re telling each other
will stick around; telling us makes them in charge.
We shrug, ask each other what we’re drinking, children
used to bomb drills, thumbing bottles
and triggers indifferent. Children who don’t think
of themselves as children. Roads boil. Our dreams fight
then say they’re sorry, stroke each others’ hair. Day slips over
day, scenes flicker across your cheek irrevocable as
tumbling through; weeks swiveling around us, stumbling
over a tripwire, setting off another story; identities
sentences guttering till awash till broken
skinned, grown second, third skins over
the memory. Yolks pool, harden. Your eyes a lit window
going dark. Our mouths bioluminescent, filling with the spines
of softer creatures; with old news, sticky with brine,
still turning, magnetic, toward any source, stupid
as night-blooming blossoms in an eclipse;
moths craned toward revving lights.

