

On Exhaustion

Between two barren homes near Van Dyke and Davison, Tori's grandmother rakes crabgrass, teasing out splintered whiskey glass and torn tire scraps from the neighboring lawn each weekend against the buzz of interstate and the grayed balloons of barren liquor stores on fire never asking how her yard manages to refill like a prescription or grow over knotty no matter how long she combs or how she pours a dedicated stare at my passing car window as if I placed this mess, as if asking how I arrived which is to say commuting on a frozen afternoon near Marcus Market to my first apartment spending hours hauling a record store in categorized milk crates up the steep slide of a December staircase or again months later at that same stoop eyeing an out-of-place cardboard box piled in the shape of a crescent on the parking lot floor being dressed in slow snowfall which I would later learn to be a man freezing with too much potion poured down his sick pipe, or how he would then throw an emptied glass bottle at my car door when I asked if I could help in any way so I called an ambulance and not the police – just thankful it wasn't another found cadaver, which is to say it was just a dress rehearsal or some notion of vanishing, I learned it first with Marco when he watched his own legs lift off the rusted grill of an off-duty school bus barreling down Rosa Parks while walking toward Avery for the last scraps of weed to wrap his stale blunt around when he told me how it happened as if it were some other body, some other burden than his own, as if the anecdote of claiming his cracked sternum made him any less accountable for its breaking or if injury spurred enough wind or heart behind his swollen chest to call Charlie for bail on two separate occasions, once from a jail cell in Kentucky, again from a detention center in Chicago, or when he asks me to spot him on rent because it's the third time this week he's had a switchblade pulled and I think of how he disappears for months on end or how the last time I saw him he told me he was a father and I bought him a whiskey and then myself a cab to catch a show with my last cash and a tailpipe spewing like a factory lung between its legs, how the show was standing room only, all fists like sledgehammers shattering the hot air, how it was a Crowded House and Blair wore many hats, poet and promoter and spitfire and logistics and split a cigarette with me between sets as a line cook would and I offered him a water and he said beer and we drank vodka warmed from the heat of so many packed bodies, a boat deck of full pews, not unlike his funeral as if only drags later at the thrum of a heat stroke in the busiest summer any of us had known, on the hottest day in July probably on record and I played Stevie Wonder the whole drive holding how it stung as it went down in one hard swallow unsettled and hot in my chest, like missing the procession to make it back to work on time, or convincing myself that not seeing his body buried in a wooden

box for too long would breathe it back, or to just stay busy, or the realization you've run out of gas on the freeway twice in the same week which is to say making it to work at all like it's not work enough to just wake most days, some lesson in overtime wages, in graveyards and salt lines, in paces similar to a plank or steps toward some finish line tape, some crescendo that doesn't require any blood or condolence, how he stays, even when he goes, and I wait, watching the basketball sun hang in the sky, then fall, only to bounce back up each morning like some haunting reminder of how syncopated our factory bones bustle, telling me over and over again to step on, praying I'll meet you again in the middle of a suitcase or on a barroom dance floor, or walking down Woodward whistling in Highland Park and tell you, friend, how long it's been since we caught our breath.

for D. Blair