

Separate Spaces

Lauren Walter
University of New Orleans

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Final Words of Perry Smith

It's a hell of a dirty thing to kill someone
the way you're about to kill me.
With inmates' photos I've replicated
mummified relics in paint: six-year-old
smiles, or baby blues
before genetics and UV light
make their scheduled appearances.
I've had time to think, too, and I want to say
that Dick and I don't—not even Andrews—
deserve such a death.

I watched each of you follow me
up these steps with nothing
but your eyes. Sickening. Real sickening.
Full of bloodlust but your feet
stationary, grounded, ready to cut out
over the dirt floor of this dank prison
warehouse, out into the rising sun.
My father and sister had already left,
back before the trial even started.

I'd like to tell someone, anyone,
I'm sorry but no apology can soften
fired clay
and now you want to lock me
in the kiln. See, you're all tribal boys
under your suits, burning
for a warrior's scalp—a war trophy,
manly—to slip in peacock plumage.
A head
for four Clutter heads.

Thought I was too sour for Twelve Steps
on a Peruvian lily-lined path?
For its productive ethics, apologies, higher
power? They're not enough, you said.
Ice it. So finally they sentenced me
to the thirteen steps, to these gallows.

Someone has to pay for all the wrong done.
But remember, Roman soldiers,
when you drive your nails into me,

fixing me to the beams; when my feet,
like bananas, dangle and bend,
just beginning to yellow and sweeten
before you yank them down,
maybe—just maybe—
I had something to offer.

In the Exam Room

Ten thousand or more came. They carried
some of them on their backs. You're a hibakusha,
you already know. With all the blood
and the burns, I shut down save for the
swab, the daub, and the bind.

From glassless windows I saw them—ants
dotting the streets, courtyard,
driveway, growing larger, crowding
the front steps, every staircase, every hall,
swarming the rooms of the hospital,
crawling all over me howling,
“Doctor Sasaki!”
“Sensei!”
“Doctor!”

You and I will always remember
that August day, the flash—
burning incandescent white, momentarily
blinding before showing us
horrors that can never be
unseen—the flash that pulled my shoes
from beneath my standing feet, the same flash
that decimated the Red Cross.
Windows blew in, blood flew out,
ceilings trapped patients under their doctors
under beds, everything flung everywhere,
the tetchy patient I was testing for syphilis
suddenly dead. The coworker I left in the lab for a minute
dead. Dead, the young morning
nurse with her bright hair.

Swab, daub, bind. Swab, daub, bind.
Still, after all these years, that thoughtless mantra
pushes my nimble fingers again to numbness
over the skull-shaped keloid I find
jutting out now in profile
from your right shoulder blade.

But your wound is nothing new, as again
I find my fingers in the exam room,
shaking themselves of the memories rekindled

in their flesh. Is your familiar, rubbery
mass of firm red-brown my Rorschach test?

I say, *Try to forget. No longer can we wage wars
on keloid scars.* Before, I cut them down
only to watch their ghosts return, full-bodied,
lying on the level ground where they fell
like burial mounds. No longer
can we call for those who dropped the bomb

to hang. *Keloids usually shrink up if
you don't retaliate,
if you find peace.*

It Isn't about Skin

I want you to understand,
although most of our classmates
wouldn't. Most people wouldn't.
So, please, let me buy you a drink.

Don't get me wrong. I'm
no racist. I mean, Omar? I love Omar,
or I loved Omar. Whatever happened to him
I don't know. An Afghan Security Guard at our FOB,
he was good: he smoked and smiled,
posed with us men for photos.
At the end of the jig I taught him he would pirouette
but his eyes, the eyes of an ex-mujahideen, stared at you
like cold stones from the bottom of some lake,
a bottom hard to reach
even with your toes.

I miss him.
At home, though,
whenever one of
them comes at me, comes
out of nowhere—even
the girls, like those sisters
at school, masked
under ghostly burqas so I can't
tell what's hiding
underneath, can't see
what's in their eyes
while they look out, behind the cloth,
the sophisticated flies' eyes
that don't belong here—
they charge
into the classroom. I swear,
it's a door-kicking mission, except
I'm the one
inside.
When these people don't trickle in
softly as sand in an hourglass,
it always catches me off-guard. I'm blasted
by a sandstorm the very color of their skin.

But it isn't about skin.

Once, I had just met my father at Catalina's Tavern,
down the road from my place, you know, over on Rt. 2,
and in walked this black guy, just
some black guy. I didn't care about that.
We kept playing cards.
The black guy came up to me, a cigarette like dusty chalk
dangling between his lips, asking me for a light
the way no American ever has
or ever will—his fingers mimicking
a match strike
and suddenly I saw the Arabic tattooed
between his thumb and pointer finger—
and knew he didn't belong here, and we were both in the desert

where the slightest thing out of
place made my heart race, like the rocks
in the roads for steering traffic or, sometimes,
just for directing our Humvees over IEDs,
leaving everything broken in the streets.

My throat ran dry. I swallowed sand, drowning
in a lake, sinking to the bottom, where I glowered
up at this black man in the bar
through cold stone eyes while I dropped lower
and lower. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even
open my mouth to cry out. I just had to leave.
Ever since then, I've been trying—
I've been trying to come back home.