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Here and Gone: New and Selected Poems

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The Knee

They huddled around me, slow-handed and quiet, light haloing their bodies blurred by the two red pills the prep nurse had brought to my room in a white cup.

Going down, blind-sided again, I saw Norman Chung’s face at my knee, smiling as it did that afternoon of my first college football game twenty five years before in Salt Lake City—until my first blown ligament made me scream. The trainer said it was stretched, and wrapped a wide Ace Bandage around it. That night I left half way-through Psycho’s premiere, unwinding the Ace in a doorway on State Street, relieving the pressure.

So Norman Bates was part of it, too, his face leering at me in white light, the upraised fist at his ear gripping the broad-bladed knife.

Purple and soft, the knee that the nurse unwrapped the next morning wasn’t mine, but some sixty-year-old accountant’s delivered frozen by a crooked undertaker moments before the operation. Examining the sutured meat, the surgeon said only, “Gooooood,” like Karloff in The Bride of Frankenstein.

But now I’m being rehabilitated, helped from one bubbling vat to another, then onto the padded table where a sleeve slipped over my bent leg inflates and flattens, breathing in a rhythm my lungs pick up. Electrodes connected to my narrow-gauge scars tighten and release the muscles beyond my control. The transformer’s needle says today I took more current than yesterday. The trainer tells me, “You’ll be a new man soon.”

But when I step outside, the odor of betadine and analgesic slips through the door, and something in the air, the failing light takes me back to high school, the door of the dank locker room I left every evening after practice, tired, sometimes sore, but hungry and hard-bodied, clean as white tape, assured of a ride home and a dinner kept warm in the oven, certain I would never grow old, never die.

(for Jim Connolly)
Muskrat

The muskrat, flattened
on the slough,
pushes upstream
toward the pool,
his wake defined
by sun low
enough to shadow
ripples. A heron,
all wings, neck,
legs, glides
just above its head
aiming downstream.
On parallel planes
they pass
just as a trout rises,
scribing a ring
that grows to encircle
the muskrat.
Two hooded ducks
bob beyond its compass,
mergansers,
their crest fans
luminous
against the dark green
water, the brown stalks
of weeds on the bank,
the night already
scaling trees
on the far side
of the island.
Two Hawks, A Body, A Torn Dollar Bill

That summer the rain lingered at our back door like the tramp my mother had been kind to. Cicadas returned from a time I could not remember and I tore up a dollar bill while watching two hawks torment a snake in mid-air above the barn.

I had gone to the store for sugar, but sneaked into Gaten’s Funeral home to view my first dead body, a woman whose husband had shot her the day before.

She lay in a black dress, her small white face smooth as church music, her mouth a ripe melon’s heart. I had just touched the platinum curl below her ear when a floorboard’s creak sent me home where steam from my mother’s canning blistered the kitchen windows. She did not know where I had been, but paid me the dollar for chores. Her hands, rough as turkey wattles, glowed.

On the back step I watched the hawks jostle and collide above the weather cock. In the seconds between one’s letting it go and the other’s taking it up the snake writhed in free fall. Cicadas pulsed in the wood lot. And not looking down, I fished that dollar bill from my jeans and spent it blindly on the heavy air—for her, for her.
Hangover Fly

Tied to imitate
a fat, white nymph,
the hair of the dog
dead now four years
still takes in trout.
Its wet bristles criss-
cross my thumb like scars
barbed wire inscribes
when I shake loose
the hook boned
in the rainbow’s jaw.

Afraid I couldn’t do it
after, I dug her grave
in the rain
while she watched,
half-blind and deaf,
nosing the slick clods
until the clay stained
her muzzle rusty.
Her damp fur clotted
on my hands when I
lifted her into the truck.

All day I have followed
my nymph downstream
to where the river braids,
spills to one sound,
and disappears in shadows.
My legs are gone
to the cold. My backcast,
collapsing in tired loops,
threatens to bury my hook
past the barb in the
loose graying folds of my neck.

Don Johnson taught in the English department at Bridgewater State College from 1971 until 1983 when he left to become chair of the English department at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, TN. After serving as chair for six years he returned to full-time teaching, and from 1992–1994 while on a leave of absence from ETSU, he taught at Iolani School in Honolulu. His poems and criticism have appeared in numerous journals, anthologies, and literary magazines. Other books include Hummers, Knucklers and Slow Curves, a collection of contemporary American baseball poems, and The Sporting Muse, a critical analysis of American poets and poetry about sport. He currently lives on seven acres along the bank of the trout-filled Watauga River in northeast Tennessee in a house that was originally constructed when George Washington was president.