

Rustin Larson

THE NIGHTHAWK
(JEFFERSON COUNTY HOSPITAL)

I.
A bat? Lonely above.
Body and heart and soul.

Its screech like a pulley drawing me up
into the black
and one street halo.

Stutka buzz
for some of the invisible,
and hunger
continues like a vein
of combustible gold in stone

as it always has; nurse brings in my tray
of tenderized enigma
and lima beans—I struggle
with the plastic silverware &

babblethink without enough
evening to invade
all the abstractions—Doctor C pops in,

tells me about fishing
the planet
of philosophical trout

where there was a shore
of shattered blue glass
where he cast
for something pitiful.

His dialect spun
wildly like a reel
and he began to feel
he was some Portuguese facsimile

about to wind in his line
and vanish
witchlike into Akasha,

the memory of events
in the cosmos feeling
the void and trumpeting
its planetary jazz.

(The television hails
the genius of Louis Armstrong.)
Lonely like a fish lonely—

cascading out to stars like Niagara
and the way survival shows its face.
Its rugged shore.

II.

Just shot an orange
with 12 units of sodium chloride.
This is practice for my next magic serum,
which I'll inject into my abdomen.

I get to pick a new district
of anatomy every week;
magic serum tends to make hardened

indentations in the skin,
which are ugly,
my educator grins.

She delights to mention my life span
has been shortened by decades,
that I might as well get used to death as a bunkmate.

Just shot an orange up,
12 units of sodium pentothal.
The bastard will never lie to me again.
Its bald porous surface
is to represent my skin,
so I snap the air bubbles from the syringe
and grin and drip rabies
onto the bed spread.
“This is good for you,” I say to the orange.

“You are going to learn
a whole new way of life.
And you might even lose something—
because, after all,
isn’t that what makes the bells ding
and the cocks crow
and the little breathy flowers to wake
in tears?”

The orange, like any good patient, accepts this—
because he didn’t know he was killing himself—
and maybe he feels a little guilt
or grief deep down
in his blinding juice
and in his wrinkled little seeds.
He didn’t know, the poor bastard, he didn’t know,
and now he’ll tell us everything. I throw
the needle in the BIOHAZARD box;
who knows, maybe the orange was HIV positive,

maybe too much truth
leaked out of the needle’s
tiny hole, maybe we’re all laughing
and feeling nothing

because death deals us numbers
we can't fathom.

III.

Evening, and the clouds moving stately as ships
to war. The sun's benediction: this cause
is just or unjust. And others: thin wisps of vapor
so high they can never be history or any dreadful

lesson. The song to battle will have to be silence.
And the fields whisper for the waters,

a plummeting and continuous prayer.
Maybe in grace, maybe toward evening, I follow, oh wings.
And in the rainpipes, a whistling gravity of things
begotten with the clarity

of glass unearthed and cleaned to repeat
itself, a drink held and sweating,

and a flavor of love colonizing our senses
after a furious summer's day. Oh transcendence,
where are you? Are you the prayer I hear just awakening
in the nighthawk? Are you

the light I know seizing my body now, in this hospital,
my arms stuck with needles and my carnations withering

in an orange juice tube my daughter painted
into stained glass?

It is difficult for man to live
in both worlds, though I know the lovely dead

have heard me and in their brightness have lifted me up
like a pebble and turned me in their refining wings
and said, "Little thing,
oh little, little one . . ."