

camera indomita

excerpt of poetry collection
by nat raum

a photo bro asks me a patronizing question in 2016 & i am still thinking about it

i sip apple pie shots under the dirtchurch
neons & member number thirteen of my little
black book asks me what i find most important

in a photograph & he speaks for himself first, says
exactly what i expect: *beauty*. i mumble;
it's an impossible question & he leaves me

for his ex two days later. i don't think about it
again for years until *honesty* smacks me in the face.
because the truth is absolutely everything

& i am nothing without somewhere to siphon
all of this urgency in my veins. the truth is, i am
a fucking wreck, okay? i am the storm

which sweeps out a village & barrels into another
tempest. once a week or so i think about how
i, still alive despite my nineteen-year-old

self's penchant for getting into strangers' cars,
haven't gotten any less vulnerable. truth be
told—i am far too easily collapsible & far

too silent in my fear of provoking flight.
& anyway, barthes was right, *the photographer*
makes permanent the truth, so why not strive

for a photograph that moonlights as a truth-teller?
i can't help but try new things. i pull silver, catch light,
scribble in sketchbooks until there is closure.

until i spread myself across naked pages, stitched
together coptic-style. is there truth, bound & numbered,
on a shelf? then there is nothing left to say.

& this is my secret work, to be worthy

After Ada Limón

& these are the wires between
synapses that make me want.
this is my secret heart, made
of sugarglass even though

i sheathe her in steel for show.
this is my covert undercarriage
of fine porcelain, polished daily.
this is my wishing to be wanted.

so you've just confronted the void

the sootblack, the abyss. the	space
in between, despite your	first mentor
hating the inherent	vagueness of work
about liminality. the great	beyond
you don't know it yet	but all of this
means <i>gender</i> because	what could
ail the heaps of scar tissue	the gristle
of wounds you cache inside	better than
nothing? you may never	know
the difference between	<i>woman & trauma</i>
or <i>man & violence</i>	but the void doesn't
care	it wraps sneaky tendrils
through your	sheared red curls
& divides you by zero	& want
encircles your body, want	to dissolve
or at least to shed skin	& be whole
like the people	whose bodies
match whatever	their brains do
when someone	says <i>gender</i>
meanwhile	your words
collapse. fail like the binary	did with you
& countless others	you belong
in the void now	home at last

self-portrait as a minivan on fire

not like bruce springsteen, not like
the controlled chaos of bonfire

in my parents' backyard, but churlish,
recalcitrant as a child sans sucker. i could

devour the whole of a honda odyssey's
engine without flinching, so i do,

& i am no longer on fire; i am the blaze,
wiry frame inextricable from the melee.

heat tumbles through air in tornados
like an apocalypse b-movie, scorching

the surface of the world that bore me,
a specific kind of ruinous & ravaging—

the type to burn before a *what was that?*
could even pass its lips. yes, i can be

the inferno which bricks cars & razes cities
like a plow through autumn wheat. impulsive

flame sizzles in the sunset & i end in ash, seared
husk of a gold minivan on the highway.

holistic guide to being agender in public

find yourself at an intersection
of two things you can't quite name,
but trust me, neither can anyone
else. no one can seem to fathom
this thing & yet it will never be

a source of wonder, only something
else to forget about. we're talking
about your transness, or maybe
the way you are still rapt with that
word, unsure it really should

apply to you, that you are really
afforded these divine sort of laurels.
but don't sit in the splendor for too long—
you are likely the only person on this
street corner who can see it.

& honestly? fuck 'em. if they want
to look at the kind of sunset you get
to witness maybe ten times a year
& only see the body of a woman,
they don't deserve you.

trptych for a dry january

i.

someone once took a photo of me
in a backwards cap & black velvet
bodysuit, american spirit yellow
in hand despite the fact that i was

indoors, window opened like it
somehow canceled out the tarsmoke
embedding itself in my wallpaper,
like a sleetslush was not falling from

the february midnight sky. i only
remember this photograph's birth
in hindsight, through the memory
of playing second fiddle to a fuck

buddy's girlfriend at my own party.
in the decisive moment, cupcakke
sings instructions on how to suck
a dick—a sure sign of the times.

the vodka on the table is empty but
i'm drinking whiskey, maybe beer.
maybe tequila at some point. i forget
what i was mixing it with but i know

there was a bottle of suerte añejo
in the cabinet. the point is there's a lot
more i don't know, don't remember,
& this photo is just the beginning.

ii.

someone probably still has every
single nude i sent them after the bars
closed. after i gulped a full frosty tulip
glass of rail margaritas at last call.

i've always been a little afraid of sex,
even before i learned how to fuck
at a woefully young age. *am i doing
this right? what if i'm not?* & a sip or three

or thirty of something strong is enough
to dull the mortifying ordeal of sharing
flesh with someone else, digitally
or in the kind of dark room my parents

would tell me not to enter if i'd actually
gone to parties in high school, if i'd
drank myself to dryness four years sooner.
i know that no one has perfection

running through capillaries of a blush-
tinged face, but it's impossible to know
a history in which i have not doomed
myself to this. my repeated insistence

of décolletage-turned-striptease is all
the evidence i need that i have a fucking
problem—no need to roll tape any
further. sober, i can see clearly.

iii.

someone somewhere online once said
only alcoholics need dry january. i didn't
need dry january but it didn't hurt—
it gave me an easy excuse, at least. i

watched drunken entropy swirl its way
around me while my family took bottles
to the face & i didn't down a drop.
i have inherited every ounce of emotion

from both sides of my lineage & real
ized i mostly cry when i'm wasted. i still
cry when i'm sober but something about
the stoppage of free-flowing alcohol

to my prefrontal cortex has hardened
me. cut off my ethyl supply & i dry up
like a prune in the oven, release eyes
from tipsy squinting & look straight

at the circumstances that brought me
here. change may not be inevitable
by nature but i assure you, when you
think about it, when you notice, when

you stare too long into the surface
of your own sun, there is no option
but to look out into the world & ask
for something, anything different.

abecedarian for the unseen photograph

a lens is a vessel through which i
bleed, same as an artery—the littlest
cut to sallow skin spurts scarlet
down chalkwhite torso.
even a prick of paper to fingertip
finds me fighting urges to
geyser.
here's the truth:
i don't like to be touched. i am
just as afraid of bloodletting as
kissing, as touches to collarbone
languid as drops of honey.
my salvation is what most
name the mortifying ordeal
of being known—a well-composed
photograph of a body dis
quieted. the truth will
reveal itself years later,
set in silver by then.
touch will wither & so will the photograph,
unbound & thumbtacked in
vibrant afternoon sun. i wish it could
waft through dusty air, scan my body like a
xerox. i can always stand to remember
yearning for something. i feel
zero shame.

too many people in art school stressed the intimacy of a book

& now i need everything to be close to me.
look back at how i only printed photographs
at 8 by 10 or smaller because i wanted
the voyeur to stand close & savor. the image

was the first way i learned to stand
before the page & weep. consider leda,

the subject of my high school photo project,
the silent victim of zeus' rape. consider
the parallel, myself ruined as such by fourteen.
now i need everything to be close to me,

visceral before physical. call it what it is—
a greyer shade of ace. i don't want only

to be wanted anymore. i need intimacy
in the sort of way i need poetry
in my immediate proximity, beset by two
paper covers in my spindly hands.

i cannot taste art on a screen & so keep
collecting volumes on a bookcase that begs

to burst, & i drive finishing nails
into plaster to hold postcard-size prints.
i trust the staying power of a sheet,
the difference a touch can usher.

absolutely torqued

the question is *what do you want to drink*
& the answer is always *yes*. i am
the inside of a fountain in that i suck
scum into my crevices like
a bottom-feeder turned loose
on a riverbed of carrion. i open
my blinds & stare down at traffic,
shutter released longer & longer
the emptier the bottle gets—taillights
blur to flowing cabernet & eastbound
traffic shines like sauvignon blanc.
(my father was an oenophile
& my childhood fever dreams
are tinted like the contents of crystal
goblets.) i always imagine someone
is watching me wobble across
linoleum floor, triple-sheeted & tossed
to the wind. imagine with delight
that a stranger sees me stumbling, waves
hello. i think of how much i care
about how glamorous i must seem
with a glass in my hand. in the mirror,
i rake fingers through miles of hair,
nearly manic—if *my beauty is all for show*,
why is no one looking at me right now?

pov: a commenter on your r/ptsdhumor meme has just alerted you that you have tinnitus

all i said was *what if you wanted to relax*

your back and shoulder muscles but god said

the body keeps the score? & all of a sudden

my head pays attention & i've got all this

ringing in my ears. i shouldn't be surprised—

i still can't tell if heat is friend or foe

or maybe frenemy, as my shoulders only

relax into spasms on the holy heating pad.

one eardrum whines especially sharply

& then blacks out for a minute like god

or whoever took a spike to

my cochlea. i am half vibrations,

half empty room, all born of things

i wish i didn't have to remember still.

then as fast as i stop hearing, i find sounds

again, still tense, still tingling. & i teem

with the source of the tension, waiting

for the rancor, for the ringing.