

fruits of the valley

excerpt of poetry collection
by nat raum

burnout

After Mario Kart Double Dash

i didn't learn to whip or weave
through opposing traffic when
i came of driving age, and maybe
that's the problem—by ten
i was an expert at dodging trucks
in mushroom city, its neonpixel
signs guiding me around
the postmodern maze of steel
and concrete. and after growing
up with Greenspring and Hillside,
i do drive like patches of city
pavement are rolling hills
and my civic has a V8, and i still
find catharsis in the shift of a gear.
yet i still spin out sometimes
when i spawn amid the highway
current, revving into its gaps
like i'm sure of where it will take me
when i'm really just winging it,
ready for the fall. i don't really
drive like i'm racing, but i'd happily
glide weightless over smooth
asphalt in pursuit of the feeling
of flying on four wheels, moonlight
at my back and soundtrack alive.
maybe i don't have a problem.

remembering as freshwater pearl necklace

somewhere, these cultured chalkwhite orbs were strung
together and clasped on a cushion of midnight

blue velvet for Grandpa Andy to buy. the museum
was in the District and prismic pinpricks shot through the gift

shop as we perused strings of pearls, cementing
memories in the swipe of a credit card. he taught

me the sort of sentimental that stored recollections
in the things we slip through curious fingertips, agents

for memory or relics of an adventure in amberlight, in scale
models of the monuments and sculptures we saw scattered

along the glossy white bookshelves. and years later,
also in the District, he'd fall on his head, days like

the museum long gone on impact, but i'd still see light
rainbows clearly each time i lay pearls here to my collarbone.

c-ptsd as witcher senses

After *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*

summer's gift of decaying skunk cabbage
shakes in false fall windcurrents, inaudible to most
but howling their leafy way through my left

eardrum, a reminder that my first fear was not
solitude but a funnel cloud barreling through
the valley like it were even a meteorological possibility.

my mind's deepest corners never did have much
regard for logic, graduating from gale force winds
to fingertips sliding so far across my shoulder blades

that i hackle like a prowling housecat in the night.
now i see security threats outlined on the landscape
in red and gold, in glowing particles that once begged

to be picked up and studied. now i know better,
know the way i've already heard every sound for miles
by the time the wind whips through to my right ear

to escape the cavalcade of paranoid thoughts.
now i sense footsteps and snap upright. doors
slam and i scurry to safety. i'm long past

that first fear, shuffling through memory each night
like a viewmaster reel of worst days. the fleursweet
of an old perfume is enough to transport me. the air

temperature skating on my skin conjures
a postcard of the familiar and the stomach-spinning.
i see signs now. i know what to look for.

on my ragged right thumb

the smell of acetone is dayglow manicures in the summer
when a dress code was discarded—the sweetsharp
scent of a weekly ritual my mother subjected me to when
i wouldn't stop biting my nails. was this the moment

i should have known i wasn't a girl, when i returned week
after week with tattered cuticles and chipped enamel
on thumbnails, when i tore apart the hour spent shaping
and tooling with my anxious teeth again and again?

it sure stuck when i played house with the other girls
during recess and assigning the role of mother became
a fight for everyone but me. and i never stopped gnawing
at bits of skin on the side of my right thumb, feminine

hands be damned. the anxiety never left me either,
instead growing the size of front-page headlines which
denounce my humanity and reflect back in my nightmares
like warpspeed ticker-tape. would i rather revert

to an anxious girlhood in the absence of an exit
plan? or do i merely mourn the few moments of safety
that came after all the knowing finally did, the morsel
of time where it felt weightless to exist?

en rose

silk dusk creeps across midtown,
wraps my staycation suite in mauvepink
as night falls over johnston square
to the east. three steeples and two pulsing
red radio towers sit level with my eighth-floor
perch, a veritable army of assorted blackbirds
scattering across the skystage between me
and the horizon. i've taken five years
off from climbing high enough to see the city
like this, squat redbrick houses gridded
across cracking concrete, just like the sidewalk
i grew up skinning my knees on. i wonder now,
my face reflected in rose enamel
wardrobe, if i will ever trip over the roots
of a tree that's taken back another city's
sidewalk, or if i could search the world
for a brand of charm i'm convinced lies
elsewhere and decide the grass still grows
more luscious alongside our rogue roots
and potholed thoroughfares every false spring.
i am encased in a mulberry-walled cocoon
for the moment, but if i ever grow used
to the hum of another traffic grid, will i
remember this bed's flamingo-print canopy
and the way i can see fire trucks roar by
so far east i can't hear them right now? if i dare
to pry myself from compacted soil and concrete,
to pass enough days in that somewhere to stretch
skyward again, will these days still dwell
with me in such fondness?

picky

picky eater means *i don't eat crab,*
in the shell or out of it, means *i don't*
pick crabs on the shore with the family,
i don't eat Sandy's crab cakes at easter
or christmas, means i don't know how good
those crab cakes are until my mother
is the one making them every holiday,
the dorr hands i still wish i inherited dropping
loose mustard and worcestershire handfuls
of jumbo lump onto a greased sheet pan.

the sky said trans rights

my dad and i used to saturday
on the shores of loch raven or prettyboy
when the snowfall season befell,
tracing my camera lens across patterns
of windblown ice and snow. tonight i touch
my bare toes to the back deck's knots
and recall every other time the winter
sky said trans rights, where the bands
of white cirrostratus spread salmonpink
through the setting sun against sealike
sky and i stared until the westward suburbs
stole her away from me. in dreams i
am waveside in the summertime, mountains
away from swamp-level winters, but i see
the most sugarflossed sunsets thread
their way through january and february—
mountain goat and water bearer seasons
of soup and woodstove warmth, the kind
i couldn't attribute to the hottest summer.

in which we cruise to neon heights

After *Mario Party 7*

first love's roulette played like three treasure chests
shuffled around a game board; i eagerly opened

each one in search of a Star, face awash in pinkblue
lights and not yet confronted with the choice

of a Bob-omb inside, waiting to knock me back to where
it started. the Shy Guy with a clapperboard calls

the scene: the meter of your disgust which filled
by the day was almost full, and when it tipped over

i was told *don't worry you're temporary and so*
are your shortcomings. the next scene shows days

later, camera level with my knees on the yarn-flecked
living room carpet, proving i've got the guts to go all in.

no one let me win anything when i was growing up;
i came of age knowing i had to play a good game.

c-ptsd as the matter splatter galaxy

After Super Mario Galaxy

the pavement, all speckled with space
and scratchy marble, will flee at a moment's notice
beneath my boots, a humming circle of solid

ground shifting to knock me into void, the place
where i am always tumbling and digging my nails
into paperthin air as anchors. i was warned

to watch my step, dodged disappearing puddles
of plinking matter splatters as i traversed memory
after memory and fell into the blackhole bowels

awaiting me at the edge of the galaxy. gravity pulls
different at the bottom of the cavernous gape,
pulls you like spacetrash into the maw of remembering,

the pit within yourself that you buried in sinew
until it was time for excision. once ejected
from the body, it becomes the unsteady ground on which

i tread lightly, the patterns i trace with steady eyes
to determine where it may be safe to step again.

gender euphoria as personal hyrule

After *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*

fast travel offers an allure for my limbs especially,
throb as they do after three or four trips
up and down the block. but i imagine the ability
to evaporate, reconstruct myself at point B
in place of being seen in the wild. it's not

for a lack of craving the fresh air. rather, the look
of this body means i can only be *woman* when
i walk down the street; i lose the self i have
sculpted in her absence while my breasts still
dome and dart my ironic t-shirt for all to see.

in actuality, gender is closer to an old forester
calling me a bright-eyed young man, bestowing
on me the masculine urge to spear a passing monster
until it dissolves into blackblight, finished with
a flourish. gender is an arrangement of pixels on a screen

dressed in sheikah armor dyed armoranthine,
a haircut i envy not only because mine won't fall
like that, but also for the boyface it frames. the boy
in me is taciturn, but when i let him go too silent,
i fear i'll never shake womanhood. i know i'll never

be fog, wish as i might to atomize these aching
hips and knees, to be perceived as pure water:
completely neutral. but is it so much to ask
that i might one day shed the skin of woman, be held
and holy in the wake of bright-eyed resurrection?