

IN THE  
CARNIVAL  
OF  
BREATHING

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poems

Black Lawrence Press

For my father,  
who knows what it means  
to love water receding.

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## Staying Afloat

You might say this is about held breath & swift kicks  
but don't confuse it with the movement of a stream  
or river. Pull a sweep-net through any childhood & lift  
an armada of leeches from a pond fixed, virus to fish.

In the blackjack of adaptation, with these turbulent  
decks that hold only aces, be positively buoyant.  
Never call the game at twenty-one. Sure, pairs are luck  
but runs are the flagella that double as propellers

or whips. Form colonies to arm. To dominate water  
with this delicate spine, this alphabet of cells, you must  
tumble through webs & chains before you can rise,  
lungs full & cinched in a body heavy with disbelief.

## Respiration

And so it begins, with a slap on the ass,  
an open mouth, and something foreign.  
We say air where once there was water,  
but that isn't right. Pretend you've been  
asleep at sea with a navy in your chest,  
in your *Unterseeboot*. To wake is to begin  
them moving your cargo through hostile  
waters, with a promise of never leaving  
the vessel, of maintaining radio silence,  
and with a perfect naval crew, you neither  
fall nor float. Your officers shift their hats  
and deal gin rummy in a teardrop hull  
that never crackles, in a shallow seabed  
where they never strike a rudder or time  
the missiles. They are geared up but never  
engaged in combat, and they seem happy  
enough. Until one day. Say someone loses  
the king of spades or steals a porno mag  
from a bunkmate. It's been too long with  
no word from home, waiting for a war  
that never comes. It ends then, with a fist  
in the face, dogpiled men caught  
in a promise to neither leave nor love  
one another, a fire lit in an airtight vessel  
where no one can open the door.

## On Home

All winter long my sons have pointed guns  
in my face and with their mouths popped

the triggers. The oldest wants to spoon me.  
The youngest wants to change his name

to *the playground pimp*. When we circle up  
for dinner, I'm careful not to say chicken *breast*

or *meatball* or anything they can follow with  
*that's what she said*. Consider the going rate

for hormones, then picture an eager group  
of eBay bidders. I joke, but someone should

tell these boys—in a wake of black mascara,  
mothers drive away. All winter long I've left

feel-good Post-its on the bathroom mirror,  
the espresso maker, the edge of my razor.

Every day, I've given myself reasons to stay.

# The Study of Lakes

We knew California would take it the hardest: losing  
palm trees is never easy. No one spoke

of the redwoods. As a community, we folded  
& unfolded our sweaters, packed night

bags with the last of our peaches. We waited.  
We breathed but thought of it only

when smoking. Eventually, the telephone poles  
couldn't hold, & we called a desert

a desert again. No one blessed the faucets or prayed  
for hailstones to halve like human eyes,

so the baptism by thistle went unnoticed. It was easier  
that way—to say no one was watching.

The Nalgene bottles went fast & the flasks even  
faster, but by night we rediscovered energy

for attacking prey, for avoiding tattoos & brandings,  
surgical scissors, punches, & ropes. We trellised

mountains in groups, using fish bones for cairns, & when  
dirt stormed over us a second time, we hoped

for locusts. Once, a woman claimed she'd seen trumpet vine  
covered with golden husks in North Dakota.

We waited. But no one blessed her pocket. No one  
prayed for a stranger's empty shell.

## To Sleep

not as a woman who brews tea and kneels  
on rice but one who swims with narcolepsy,

who cinches all the alleys into darkness  
and fells trees, who forces a bit into the mouth

of aurora borealis until the moon parades  
its wounds in color, until her limbs go numb

scene by scene, by sleight of hand, by flip  
turning in a lukewarm pool between what walls

we build, between what shocks we tuck in  
tight, between what we somersault and dredge

from our eyes at the temperature of sleep  
without drowning, without burning

our temples, without righting the lies we tell  
our minds to make us fade, to make us stay

still and take it, to make us love paralysis  
to such a point we jump in water, legless.

## My Lake

My lake has many rooms and one, which is red with a door that's always open but chained. My lake owns boxing gloves. She owns lingerie. She can swing, she can cha-cha, she can salsa and tap but refuses a simple slow dance. My lake learned early to rest the needle without a scratch. She has been classically trained in lovemaking. When she wants to ride a roller coaster, she does it alone. When she lets her hair down, men go blind. My lake doesn't take any shit. She wears stilettos in ice storms, does crosswords in pen. She eats red meat. Her porch needs painting, her flowers need weeding, but my lake reads palms in twelve different languages. If my lake puts her hand to your chest, she decides. At times, whole days can pass when she won't let anyone near her. She freezes just before she murders her own shore. It's been years, and still my lake won't name the delicate sound of ice taking, then brushing away. She might say it's the train of a wedding dress, or the rain falling on a glass slipper. There are times she sees the grace of two loons gliding—their bodies a duet over breaking water, and she slows herself. She makes a cradle.