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Incognito, And Not And Other Poems
LYNN McGEE
Air Show

My life is not the way I want it, but I walk through it as calmly as I walked through the Air Show that summer—cheekbones blazing, white skirt whipping, a man’s voice from the loudspeaker falling on me like a net—We can hit any target, anywhere, any time.

I grieved my life that day. A bomber dipped its wing, and darkened the horizon with beehives of smoke. Heat blurred the runway’s glittering tar. Card tables wobbled with the weight of souvenirs. I fingered the fins on a rusty grenade. My three-year-old leaned against me: Carry me, carry me, and I carried him, carried him.

Lawn chairs were planted in a jet wing’s triangular shade. A man selling programs wore a patch on his sleeve, buxom redhead riding a torpedo, her strong thighs clamping its shiny, curved sides. My older boy thumped combat helmets, picked through Top Pilot trading cards, Desert Storm commemorative coins, coffee table copies: Designation Baghdad. The voice on the loudspeaker swelled with volume, stronger than I’ll ever be, cheerful and bold—Don’t blink folks, or you’ll miss it!—an F-117 stealth fighter, Darth-Vader black and faster than the screech it makes. Look who wants in the show—it’s Fat Albert!—a stubby T-130, nose up, engines screaming.

I nudged my sunburned children to attention. Wind picked up, sirens wailed, a golf cart full of cameramen whizzed past and high above, the Blue Angel jets glinted and roared in formation: two on the outside, right-side up; two on the inside, upside down. Clouds rose in welts on the creamy blue sky. A man-size inflatable beer can toppled off a table, landed face down and rolled, and a great voice intoned, Ladies and gentlemen, the pilots’ hometowns: Fayetteville, San Antonio, Tallahassee, San Diego.
My boys kicked each other, retreated and attacked.
The Angels peeled off, landed and taxied, 
hot metal beaks aligned on the runway.
The pilots popped plexiglass hatches, 
dropped to the pavement and strode toward their fans, 
adjusting jaunty beige berets and clicking their pens.
White-uniformed sailors held back the crowd.
The pilots scribbled autographs, solemn and quick, 
and the great voice grew gentle—*Our nation’s defense is only as strong as the support it gets from you.*

I longed for a gentle voice, that day.
I grieved the life I could have had, and the great, 
gentle voice said, *Today, in tens of thousands, you showed us you care.* I wanted someone to care 
that the sitter stayed overnight, so I could find 
a motel room, reading mysteries, sleeping late.
I wanted someone to care I marked up catalogues till three, 
college catalogues that writhed in a barrel of fire, 
turning to ash, with that week’s trash.

I grieved my life that day, walking calmly 
through the air show, and when it was over, 
I tracked down our car, its dashboard scorched.
My smaller boy, assigned the back seat, took the front—
I yanked him by the arm, swung him up and slammed him to the ground. He curled there and sobbed.
My oldest sat strapped in the sweltering car, 
reading his program, growling deep in his throat, 
emitting choppy ammo sounds and whistling 
like a falling bomb, tracing 
the pilots’ signatures with his finger.
How to Cook

Joseph’s reflection wavers
in highly polished stainless steel.
His white smock dances,
black shoes mottled with gravy
skim the rubber mat. He pivots,
rolls a salmon steak in flour,
causes flames to leap beneath
a skillet, tosses shrimp
and stirs them as they sizzle
on hot iron. He maneuvers
around an ungainly metal hose,
busboys scraping leftovers
into the trash can, waiters sawing
slices of bread. He dips
a shoulder, reaches beneath
a counter, crumbles cheese
onto a salad, douses hot filets
with water, shakes milk in a canister,
ladles rice, smacks his hand down flat
on the bell that says Ready.

Six days a week, Joseph steers
the kitchen, bright and compact
as a submarine, lights blanching
the counter. He drapes a pan
with marbled frills of bacon,
his co-worker in yellow gloves
stacking plates that smoke and cool.
He squeezes a lime in a dollop
of mustard, casts in poppy seeds,
and membranes of pimento.
Some internal clock tells him
the broccoli has turned
dark green, beef has reached
the degree of roasting
known as medium-rare,
and not medium, not rare.
In cool dark beyond the kitchen, patrons snap open cobalt blue napkins, and choose among Mahi Mahi Macadamia, Chicken Lemonese, Antelope Au Poivre, Tuscan White Bean Soup. Joseph spoons veal stock, raspberry duck sauce and wild mushrooms into mixing bowls. He wears a gold earring, a goatee, a baseball cap turned backwards, and he tosses tongs from hand to hand.

By midnight, he is resting, elbows on the counter. A man in a suit, a woman in a fur coat stop to give their compliments and Joseph gives that smile that hides the why of cooking for a living, walking home at two a.m. with a small white bag of food, striding past the rusting shells of cars, jumping over sprays of broken glass, climbing the stairs to his humid room with its posters of silken beaches, returning the next afternoon to the restaurant’s flapping sidewalk banner, its slick, gray brick walls and black waffled ceiling, a neon red Pegasus, glowing horse of flight, of escape from what is earthly, poised in frozen leap above the tables.
Three Views of the Human Body

1.
At first I thought it was the steaming tortellini, plump pillows sliding on a scalding plate, that drew beads of perspiration along my friend’s hairline, rivulets etching from his temples in perfect symmetry. He patted his face with a napkin’s stiff corner, snapped it open, explaining This is better than waking up, the sheets drenched. Food often breaks the fever—as if the body, HIV positive and weakened by tuberculosis, thrush, and other once-obscure illnesses, is hungry for sustenance, mistakes it for salvation, and celebrates with a surge of salty cleansing.

2.
Because he is dying, we let Richard cheat at croquet. The grooved, wooden balls, stately as grapefruit, lumber across the lawn, clack against each other and brush through wire wickets. Richard sends his ball hopping into gravel, nudges it with his foot, and we squint beyond him into the blazing sun, as if fascinated with feathery clouds, the fir tree’s great maternal nod. He nudges his ball again, amused at our leniency, smug as a child with indulgent parents, though we feel more like parents who do too little, whose child is crouching on the lip of an abyss, and cannot be called back to safety. Richard swings his mallet, wind whipping his slacks, which cling to whittled shins, the stark blade of thigh, and we guess at the breeze’s
velocity, comment on the garden’s
pristine white bells,
the exquisite fluency of birds.

3.
Trading stubs of pastel chalk,
we drew hearts with names inside:
Nancy loves Lynn; C.J. loves Don;
the pavement blooming,
two thousand queers gathered
for a rollicking mega-wedding.
Shoulders back, stomachs flattened
by lavender cummerbunds, celebrants
strutted in milky tuxedos, twirled
in frosty gowns and pin-striped suits.
One man slumped in a wheelchair,
his groom kneeling beside him,
adjusting their daisy wreaths,
faces beatific, taking the full force
of the sun. After the speakers,
the vows, the exchanging of mementoes,
the man in the wheelchair turned
to roll away, chrome wheels flashing,
his legs apparently withered not by wasting,
the kind the virus brings, but by
some other disease, perhaps one
that leaves longevity intact.
Look, he’s handicapped, I whispered
to my lover, and we beamed at each other,
as if this were glorious news.
Seattle in July

Nancy and I are jogging past the campsites, and down by the lake shore, David is kneeling at the foot of a pine tree, gouging the earth with a garden spade, pouring his lover's ashes into a small pit that releases the scent of a storm. He pushes pine needles, leaves and dirt back over the grave, and when we show up, flushed with exercise, lungs pounding, he puts his arms around our shoulders and pulls us in.

Back in David's neighborhood, where white-women joggers are rare, a skinny boy in a straw hat skips beside us for half a block. A woman waves a glass of something red and yells Faster! Two men bent over the engine of a car rise to wipe their foreheads and courteously nod. We huff up the driveway and David's coal-black mastiff puppy snorts at the crack between packed ground and fence. These dogs live thirty years, he tells us. And getting one was a promise to live that long, too.

Celebrating our visit, he peppers a rack of steaks, scoops the steaming pulp of an eggplant, pinches the crust on a raspberry pie. Robert shows up, lesions clustered on the end of his nose. He brags about the sunburn on his bald spot, his week on the white deck of a cruise ship, men in speedos rubbing coconut oil on each other's shoulders, sauntering to dinner with a swizzle stick tucked behind one ear:
red means *no thank you*, yellow means *try me*, green means *meet me at my cabin*.

He dangles his fork and talks of joining the seminary at fourteen, boys strolling shoulder to shoulder, wool cassocks sweeping the floor. On hot nights, they met in the cathedral’s forbidden tower, cooled themselves on the stone floor, passed a joint and watched the moon melt from window to window. He raises his wine glass, toasts our health, and we toast his.

The next day, David drives us to an island; his car clicks in place on the ferry and he dozes off, slumped over the steering wheel. We listen to his breathing, as if it could tell us which cells are winning. In whispers, we remember his lover, fluid dripping down a tube to the vein in his arm, antibiotics tumbling into his blood as he passed around a bowl of Hershey’s Kisses, turning his ordeals into pajama parties. Stretched out on the bed we watched *Lovers and Other Strangers*, Diane Keaton so young her face is plump. When the clear bag went slack, he gingerly pulled tape off the needle, slid it from his vein and dropped it in the orange, biohazardous waste container I held with both hands.

*No one has died in two whole years,*
Nancy says. *No one really close.* We brace against the wind and make our way to the ferry’s prow. A duck bobs in its churning wake, paddling out and pulled back to the ferry’s rusty side. We look away and the duck disappears,
maybe sucked into the propellers, maybe inhaled by something sleeping on the bottom of Puget Sound, stirring in the throes of slumber, sending ripples that jostle and frighten the swimmers far above it, swimmers who love the water, and stay where they are.
Incognito, And Not

Last Halloween in the Village,
I saw half-a-dozen “Jasmons,”
eyes wild behind their hockey masks,
cleavers swinging.
Women wore cat ears
and even animals walked stiffly
in their hats and jackets.
The sidewalk was glazed with egg yolks,
shaving cream slid down phone poles.
A long-legged guy in a wedding gown
got hounded by a pack of teenage boys
who wolf-whistled and pitched beer bottles
with increasing accuracy. The big bride
hiked his gown and lengthened his stride
down the cobblestoned street,
hard to navigate in heels.
His admirers gathered speed.
His blond bouffant bounced—
I feared it being yanked off
by someone and tossed in the air,
falling like an animal.
I knifed through the crowd,
ready to defend this large-boned beauty,
implicated by my own history of disguises,
the wig I threw on like a cap,
synthetic locks streaming behind me
as I raced on my bicycle,
my father standing at attention
in the driveway, medals cooling
on his chest, making other men
go rigid with white-gloved salutes,
making private parking spaces
bubble with oil and anticipation,
making me want a costume, too.