



*seven
poems
by
Blake
Campbell*

ACROSS
THE
CREEK

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CREEK

DEDICATED TO RACHAEL DAIT



BIOLUMINESCENCE

And he entered, great spelunker,
the resonant and ancient darkness,

that empty ventricle keeping
the earth's heart beating with the silent calls

of bats, their acrid guano blanketing
the cold, stone floor.

Such hollowness, so far beneath the surface,
and yet the sunlit world still stepping

to more infectious rhythms up above
never once tempted him with its pulsations—

that was a land of prattle, and light so bright
it blotted out the rarer glows he sought.

On he walked, no flashlight in his hand.
He closed his eyes, preferring

a darkness of his own to the black
of that slick gullet, the cave he could not stop

from swallowing him. Soon he reached the room

where glowworms dangled sticky threads

to catch unwary insects. They taunted his shut eyes
with hints of incandescence.

He shivered in the dampness of that space,
but in the end,

it was easy for him to slide his eyes awake
in the dark and empty cavern

and count the living stars upon the walls.

ANOTHER AUTUMN

I dreamed another death had called me home.
You drove me there. Our summer in the city
Spent, we longed to breathe the rural air.
When we arrived, the autumn weather fell
Upon us like a cloak of quietness.
The old black walnut's boughs were almost bare;
Its leaves, I knew, had been the first to drop.
Already pungent husks had stained the deck,
And owl-faced halves of squirrel-plundered nuts,
Lodged in the yellowed lawn, looked back at us.

I can't remember when or why you left.
Had I said something wrong? And why was my
First impulse when I noticed you were gone
To cross the field and search the old green barn?
You weren't there, and when I went upstairs
I saw the summer's bats had left as well,
All save for one—an eyeless corpse the cold
Dry air had mummified, wings half outspread,
Still dangling from a rafter by one claw.

The heavy barn door opened on an elm
Inflamed with poison ivy, cardinal red.
A masquerade of cedar waxwings came
To pluck the off-white berries from the vine

And fled as I stepped out. The smell of wine
Wafted from nearby thickets on the breeze
And seemed somehow to pull me toward the woods.

Beneath the tulip poplars and the oaks
Long shadows fattened on the falling dusk.
At last I thought to call your name. I called
Until my voice grew hoarse, and the wind picked up,
Turned bitter, and shook loose all the leaves at once.
They scratched against my shoulders and my face,
Filled my clothes, began to blanket me,
When suddenly I woke in August heat.

Dawn. Weak sunlight seeping through the blinds
Dappled your supple body as you stirred
And turned to me. A nightmare, I explained,
And muttered some apology. Still half
Asleep, you kissed me, took me in your arms,
And told me not to worry anymore.
Outside, the day's first train screeched to a halt,
And yet you pulled away from me and drowsed.
What undertow of dreaming drew you back
Against the city's din, I could not say,
But looked on as the slow return of sleep
Slackened your smile and shut your eyes again.

AQUASHICOLA

I tuck my jeans into my socks
against the ticks. Your yard
becomes a wood and then a wetland.
We cross a creek and crouch
at its edge, looking in at a bend
where the current has slackened.
Something dead and gelatinous
rests at the bottom. I fish it out
with a stick for your inspection:
a northern red salamander,
no longer red, its black spots fading
into the pallor of waterlogged flesh.
Fresh from the chrysalis,
spring azures and gray hairstreaks flit
like animated petals. A single
spring peeper sings.
We push through cattails
for a look at the pond,
and bulbous bullfrog tadpoles
scatter toward the center.
First flowers—wild bleeding heart,
trout lily, lesser celandine—
penetrate dead vegetation,
where a basking black racer
retreats as we draw near.

The dry and trampled rushes of last year
crackle as he slithers off, unseen.

CRANE BEACH

On the beach the sandy wind
Falls and rises in the thinned
Ranks of grass that crown the dunes
Where the piping plover croons,
And its efforts—inexact,
Fashioning a ventifact
From this cloudy shard of quartz,
Billowing our shirts and shorts
As it blows in from the sea—
Mime your putting up with me
And my putting up with you:
Though the wind may chill us through,
Edges soften in its surge
Where the sea and sand converge
And the sand's corrosive sting
Leaves behind a polished thing.

IN THE COURTYARD

Shielded from winter
in this hothouse of opulence,
a minor Eden stretches at our feet.
Glass panels overhead admit
the midday January light,
feeding the fiddle—no,
*cello*heads of giant tree ferns
unfurling into fronds.
Pieces of antiquity
—stone fish, mosaics, marble limbs—
sit nakedly among new growth,
a carpet of green. Come April,
I tell you, nasturtium
will pour from the balconies
in cascades of flame. Photos
aren't permitted up there,
where restored portraiture preserves
the looks of another age. Here,
the brightest colors come
from potted orchids your hand
grazes as we pass,
orchids with petals
like pink Rorschach ink blots
on flesh-white paper,
orchids with purple freckles

shaped like the tiny doves
that spill from a shattered sand dollar.
These flowers unfold as if inked to
extract, reshape, and craze
the substance of our brains
into symmetries, blurred but familiar,
which by their very opening
defy the unabating cold outside.

COLD APRIL

The grackles cackle. At the pond, wood ducks
pair off and fuck, the drakes

gleaming in their green imperial headgear.
The joggers begin the circuit, gleaming

in their expensive sweatsuits,
as if nature were only a backdrop.

It is nature that makes us unnatural.
This body I walk in remembers

its brief awkward beauty
bought at the cost of health, and the loss of that beauty.

It knows the pressures of death
and those of friends still alive but silent

as I follow my usual path, afraid
to pick up the pace. At the end

of the circuit, what remains but morning,
already unfolding its petals toward corruption?

There is only the sun, cold on the water,

the long walk home, the workday awaiting,

the mouths of the crocuses closing at nightfall,
the debts to be paid.

ACROSS THE CREEK

We've found the forest no more destitute
For summer's end. The birch's leaves flavesce
And fall with their expected loveliness
On death-white mushrooms clustered at its root.

I grasp an oak, long felled, by one tough knot
And overturn it. Salamanders squirm,
Glistening, over moldered wood. An earthworm
Startles and retreats into the rot.

Our sojourns here remind us not to search
For resurrections. Even after frost
The sleeping earth retains her tiny lives,

And even stripped of leaves, the paper birch
Subsists on what has been and what is lost,
But what in other living things survives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Blake Campbell grew up in Pennsylvania, and lives in Salem, Massachusetts. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming publications including *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *The Dark Horse*, *The Emerson Review*, *Lambda Literary*, *The Road Not Taken*, *Fulcrum*, *Hawk & Whippoorwill*, *The Lyric*, *Incessant Pipe*, and *The Boston Compass*. Linda Gregerson selected his poem “Bioluminescence” for the Academy of American Poets’ 2015 Alike Perroti and Seth Frank Most Promising Young Poet Award, and he has also served as a featured reader for Mass Poetry’s U35 reading series. He is grateful to Christine Casson and Sam Wronoski for their help in refining these poems; to Holly Van Leuven for her insightful comments on their current arrangement; and to Rachael Dait for her photographs and inspiration.

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*“The birch’s leaves flavescere
And fall with their expected loveliness”*

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