

Two poems by Troy Shapiro

Then

Is it possible that I will look at the clock and see a time stopped?
Batteries die.
The time we search for on the wall
Seems irrelevant—
Hours signify nothing but motion.
To us, days are punctuated merely by transitions:
Not from moment to moment, but from task to task.
We pace the halls to move towards the door,
Squeaking through the campus walls to go home

And come back.
A little red sign on its face: “Now”

Now, he sits in a low, slim desk
Cramming together sequences and series and sums—
Vague scratches of numbers, squished in between French conjugations.
The thick brick Biology book looms on the edge of the chair
What does he think of it; its billion word weight?

Now, she stands on the peeling orange glow tape
Just left of center stage,
Regurgitating the undigested Shakespeare
to a crowd of empty seats.
The lights are dimmed, the air is thick with dust from the styrofoam house they’re
building to look like Greece.
Her voice creaks with mentholated cough-drops and overhoneyed hot tea. What do
they think of her blank verse and unrehearsed hopes that no one
will come to see?

Now, our breath comes in gasps, repeating the beginning of the same sentence:
“I disagree... His diction contradicts
His diction contradicts...
His diction contradicts...”

Now, we turn our faces
to the windows to try to escape the boiling eyes across the room
Because now if she mouthed “what’s wrong”
those tears looming on the edge of dirty contacts
would fall heavy like a textbook on the desk now.

Now, we interlock our fingers and grip
the cool steel of the seat in front of us
with our toes to try to stop our shaking.
But now, the whole room rumbles.
Now, the window rattles against our faces.
Now, our bouncing heel forces tremors through the cement floor.
Now, fear swells in our skull like the birthday balloon that popped when we
tried to draw a smiley face on it in magic marker.
Fear—now we really won't grow out of this spell
now our best just isn't good enough
now when we flip ourselves inside-out like a cheap pair of socks,
they'll still let us down.
Now—I force myself to step on the crack
Catch the lip of my shoe on the sidewalk
And fall, face first,
Into the instant.

Shedding Skin

We dragged our toes around the water
Trying to trace the pictures in the clouds,
Swirling starlight into moonlight
And wiping through with little flecks of mud.
I saw a dragonfly
Land on the tip of the pier;
Smiling
At the reflection beneath our feet.
I raced you home in flip flops
And danced on raindrops
That settled from my eyes—
Bounded over them
Crunched them up in the gravel
And left the dust
In your headlights.
I spun in circles over bridges
And knew that my legs couldn't stop—
Wouldn't stop—
It was me
For an instant
No, for three—

I let myself pour out through my fingertips,
Through my toenails,
Out my ears;
I shook like a mountainside,
Tripped on a cedar root,
And came crashing down
Into the river.
You sat smiling
Laughing
And kissed me again.

The air shouldn't taste like wine.
Words shouldn't fall like acorns from a tree,
But my mouth is flat,
The words are pale—
I don't remember how to talk,
I don't remember how to breathe.

But who needs air in the dim cool water
I left myself like a snakeskin on the side of the road
And bathed like a child in the rain.