



Before Doubt // McLaina Elise Evans // Gold Wake Press

Belonging. Now. Optimus Prime. Where I Am Lactitia. Before Doubt. Wrecked. Waiting.

Belonging

I'm alone in this city where you live, were placed down like a paper boat in a river.
I don't belong any more than you, here where seconds are sounded out by crosswalk
boxes.

It's better you don't know I've come for the Broad Sound, to be near you without you
knowing.

My dream, to see you from the better side of a one-way mirror. You, putting both palms to
glass,
trying to look in. I will press up there, my hands near yours but never fully within—never
fully within. July is for goodbye, the Sound a farewell long coming, here in not-your, not-
my
city.

Here, here, what word lost in ocean salt.

Now

If you would call, just once, and say nothing but *it's true*.
Goethe or Gilbert (why can't I remember), you put my hand
to the spine as if to remind me where I belong. I couldn't buy
the book in front of you, went back to the store and forgot where
I stood when you touched me, strangely intimate, forgot the name
of the volume. I didn't make up the rain, the way you called
my name in it. The way the umbrella lifted to show your face.
Write me a letter, only: *remember the sun shower?* Give me one day.
Listen to what I like on the radio; watch my lips unknowingly
form the words *it's now or never*. Come see my kitchen. Let me
cook for you: roasted lamb so sweet on the bone, apricots sugared
and simmered all day. Eat the Brie and Gala apple, fresh raspberries
from the carton while I slice the bread. Watch how I tighten the faucet seal.
See what I do when you're walking streets I don't know the names of.
Who are you smiling at? Others stand near you on the train, touch skin
to skin in summer. Tell me it's done. *Say over. Say never.*

Optimus Prime

I see you, really. There's a boy built under there, under
your skin that's changed a thousand times since then.

I know the quiet time that came after the first time
you looked down at your hands, unbuttoning your shirt

and saw them as a man's. And there's that moment they
seem not your own, the moment you almost want to go

back because now, now you have to escape from the sadness.
You have to hold it here, in the manubrium, there above

the sternum, there where the bowed bones don't quite touch.
There, Latin for *handle*. And now, through your body

that covers the boy, I see you handle, boy, you handle.
And boy you learned to fight, to take a punch and taste

your own blood, you choke it down like the first beer
you ever try. You learned to dispose, to keep your room

bare, to not need many things. All of this regulated by a bone,
this place where you keep loss, this tiny shield. I tell you now,

here is where my hand can break. Here where I press you
like an action figure, hoping you'll open arms wide instead

of drawing in-transforming into some vehicle aimed away.

Where I Am Lactitia

When I think about him, I don't think about his voice.
I think about his Klimt tattoo, the way it slid up my thigh
and I could feel the outlines. I think about his raised skin.
Y is ice, a place it takes forever to get to. He's impossible
but his skin reaches out to me, imprinting image on alabaster.

Everything about me is out: naked in the kitchen, him watching.
Knocking my ass against pots and pans, island, laced curtain.
Y puts fingers over my eyes, says *forget who you are*, and I really do.

A lesson in reductionism: his touch knows just the right pressure.
I can tell where he comes from by his voice. His mouth moves
the way I like mouths—not all at once, left side or right. Y makes
me say again these words: armor, lines, longing. His nose is strong
and does not remind me of my father's. He does not live in possibility.
He will never give enough to me.

He is parts, more parts. A great machine that marks upon the skin.
Tolstoy comes: *our body is a machine for living*. Extraordinary, this.
The miracle we can keep from consuming each other bit by bit.
To think if my body finds a splinter, it works its way out.
To think of what we are—wheels, rivets, coppered bearings.

Before Doubt

In the hours I believed I wanted to pluck my name from every mouth.

In the hours I believed I lived my life upon a wire, the way of Edith Piaf's voice warble-all day long frantic, where a surefoot missing is a foot missing altogether.
You were a time when I didn't look down, held the fear of below in my throat like a tiny bird swallowed.

In the hours I believed I drew your portrait on a wall with charcoal.
I smudged the angles of your face with my fingers and in those hours I cut my hands up but didn't mind.

In the hours that I believed I forgot so as to remain faithful.

In the hours I first believed it was as if I carried a projector between my ribs.
And everywhere I walked the lines of your face scrolled over brick, the raised lines between your mouth and nose leading a path on cobblestone.
And I couldn't touch the picture no matter how I reached, and you were impossible, a miss.

In the hours after you said *you've always known that*, I didn't lift my head up for days.
I didn't pull my eyes up until your name, dropped at my feet, suddenly belonged to someone else.

Wrecked

In Virginia it is thunderstorming. You are in bed with a lover up the coast and I write at a desk that faces the ocean. Lightening breaks violet in the sky, bright as a weird dream. Distant lights across ocean call, blink: far, far. And you are not here and I have not seen your face in nearly a year. You float through your life like some demi-god parting water. Lightening vines across heavy Southern air, moving like a lover's hand beneath cool sheets. The regular pull of the lighthouse beam. A lone blue signal calls your name, a single syllable, half a heartbeat.

I have been feeling all day eyes upon me, have rewritten my death over and over for the paper. And I have to tell you now before I am unable: you should be here. Pulled from the shared bed as if from a wire, moving hair from my peculiar collarbone, saying *sleep now come back to me I shall make constellations of your beauty marks and scars and we will trace them in bed, create stories to tell lost sailors or our child who does not yet have vision.*

A strand of amber separates the sea from sky here. In the distance ships are built by men like my father. Tonight you slip inside her as a familiar stowaway. Tonight you make small movements in the dark, lips untouched. Tonight I would form a bowl with my hands and let you fill it up with need.

Waiting

I travel: on the move to be unmoved by you. Always attempting to arrive late, always giving up the itinerary. You are a clock, pressing on and on and haven't called.

Here I am, Chicago downtown Loop and you hang there, over my head, even. Turquoise and brash, over the sidewalk and shoppers who are deflecting, too, who are moving on through their own therapeutic methods. I'm trying to defend myself from chill but want the wind, the invisible force that reminds me some influences remain unseen.

Boston: I walk alone in a city where it feels good to be a stranger; I'm stranger. I just ride trains here, am moved by another, and there you are: Custom House Tower, still above me, scraping sky. Here, you have four faces. Here, you are looking out and even here I wait and haven't bought my ticket home.

Further, Cairo: I'm getting swallowed by heat that changes my body, makes me sweat. My body completely working to cool me down, something else sets me afire. I wander the Valley of the Kings, take place in a place where many walked before me, where animals I have never seen or touched but only ridden in dreams are used for travel, and there you are. Fragment of sundial, color of desert ground. You live with the camels. You live, even here, I can feel your breath welcome on the dampened back of my neck and hate you for it still. I don't write you letters.

At last, in Florence, the place where I feel loved without you, somehow. I drink alone in cafes, cappuccinos with striated foam from Italian men, hands sticky from serving gelato, street artists calling to draw the heart shape of my face, and there, there still you are. All twenty-four hours this time, all open, in the Duomo, and I am reminded of every, every hour that I wait. Your face, your face around the world, your face unfamiliar that I know, your face, your face, your face, your arms, always moving, I can feel them on me.

Here's the truth: the clock's all oscillation. A movement of my body around your body. You sit at home. You drink strong coffee and write at your desk always. I don't remember the name of the city I'm in now, my suitcase jammed full. On foot, stagnant.

McLaina Elise Evans is a graduate of the Bennington Writing Seminars, most recently published in *climae*, *Anti-*, and *The Whistling Fire*, among others. She is a contributor to *The Hipster Book Club* and lives in Virginia.