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Three Poems

by Steven Riel

For Patrick, My New Nurse

who led me inside the bathroom,
threaded my arm & two of its tubes
through the wrong armhole of a second
johnny when I confessed my worry
about mooning random passersby;
who planted his thighs a thumb's
length from mine to tie soft
cotton snug against skin
stretched over scapula guarding that
hollow where prehistoric wishbone soared
like prayer;

 who remained, unruffled
(I focused on the telling little
muscles at ease around his eyes)
when my hard-on rose in thanks, alive

Fingernails

from 13 Ways of Looking at My Effeminacy

Each day I fail to trim their advance
past where a real guy would have
bit them to the quick,
& their tips nip my palms,
 thumbs & fingers stretch & flex,
 butterflies arching toward
 bangles of sky.

Then danger rises, rises:
when bulbs sprout wings;
when pronouns flit through branches
 & wrists take their first flutter;
 when the actor, all antennae,
 blends into the role
 that is his birthright,
 when he finds himself
 with O for a mouth
 needing
new words.

What if he ends up a murderess?
What if all she unfurls
can't be folded up & put away?

(The Halloween I wore press-on nails,
my best friend cooed,
"You've never looked so radiant.")

Defiant, we tottered across
Manhattan in heels,
sprayed by scattershot jeers
from knots of toughs.

Near some curb
the glow got lost.)

Week after week,
I clip back my latest millimeters,
flush their ten thin strips down the john;
prune perennials before any ruffles uncurl;
slice off powdery wings
for fear of where I might alight;
never, never letting that What, that Me
unclench

until what I have become
becomes but this:
no not ever
a flower taking flight.

Eddies

Pumped with caffeine,
hyperventilating, you
plunge, one among many
commuters, fellow
flotsam, coursing
towards a station
from all directions,
but you find yourself staring
at twigs that no longer vie
for some space in the canopy
but point instead to the ground.

Cramped on the platform, you turn
your spine to the steel track,
snuggle against chain-link, wanting,
wanting to whisper
encouragement
to rushes huddled
in this suburban slough.

Sparrows squabble among brittle cattails.
You wonder what slinks through these
dead stalks to feed at night.
Did you forget that predators
could lurk in any meagre
remnant of nature you
might romanticize? Still,
you need refuge, even if
your wounds are internal
and leave behind no trail.

At the office, you pretend

hallways are tributaries.
You shy along walls
where floor wax builds up
and hug the quiet
edges of meanders
becoming oxbows.

Secretly, you're drawn to
eddies, their wayward
water whirling under
bent-over reeds—
and it isn't that you retreat
to avoid making mistakes,
because you still bungle
when alone, hunkered down,
but you go on, shouldering
your blunders—silt in the unbroken
swirl of what circles past...

Steven Riel is the author of three chapbooks of poetry: *How to Dream*, *The Spirit Can Crest*, and most recently, *Postcard from P-town*, which was selected as runner-up for the inaugural Robin Becker Chapbook Prize and published in 2009 by Seven Kitchens Press. In 2005, Christopher Bursk named him the Robert Fraser Distinguished Visiting Poet at Bucks County (PA) Community College. His poems have appeared in anthologies and in numerous periodicals, including *The Minnesota Review*, *Christopher Street*, and *The Antigonish Review*.

He served as poetry editor of *RFD* between 1987 and 1995. He received his AB from Georgetown University; an MFA in Poetry in 2008 from New England College, where he was awarded a Joel Oppenheimer Scholarship; and an MLS from Simmons College. The Massachusetts Cultural Council awarded him a grant in 1992. One of his poems was selected by Denise Levertov as runner-up for the Grolier Poetry Peace Prize in 1987. His poems were nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 1989 and for *Editors= Choices III* in 1991.

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