

The Folding

Nick Laird



i

In the midst of this lifelike grief
I am stood at the cutlery drawer,
and keep on standing here as if
I might remember what I came in for,
but then I think of something else,
and head upstairs only to forget
what that was and find myself

eyeing the unmade bed, the bookshelves,
the snow still coming down outside
and realise then, and lift a stack
of printer paper and the safety scissors
for the kids to make snowflakes
I'll tape to the kitchen windows,
since that was what my mother did.

ii

I know in terms of cuts and folds
a modest pattern's adequate,
that infinite complexity's composed
by simple rules, and the last was that
you had to live it out, right to the end –
even as your body starts to stop,
as your face withdraws from itself

and your eyes continue, trapped,
braving a last turn about the place.
O that dull, almost inaudible pat

of obliterative fleck on the glass,
and the clock, and the held breath
as the kids concentrate on symmetries
or the blades' irresistible path.

iii

I am four and follow her until I spot
the photo booth and slip inside
to climb up on the spinny seat, and watch
cartoons that do not start, and wait
for forty years as they raze
the aisles and checkouts, the car park,
wait for her to draw back the dark

and find me here, staring at the screen
where what I learn of absence is the panic
is substantial, the face is lit with tears
and snot and everyone is crying
as I fold myself into her skirt,
unable to explain that I was here,
behind the curtain, the whole time.

iv

Civil dusk. I scrape the plates.
The falling's softened to a waltz
and the garden's lit lavender white.
I suit them up like astronauts
and we step out through the airlock
to a scene as soundproofed as a dream:
its padded walls and ceiling are being

shredded without end. A snowflake catches
in her mother's lashes when Katherine's
looking upwards through the branches
at the sky, at the unfolding of bright
wave on bright wave, coherent scrim
of quick scantlings looking to alight, alive,
and we hold out our hands until they are white.



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Three Poems

Nick Laird



The Mark

After that Etruscan she-wolf
tenting milk-fat twins, the grabby
cherubs added fairly awkwardly

around the time of Michelangelo,
we chance upon Marsyas, nearly dead.
Boxer's nose. Cow's lick. The arms tied

overhead standard white marble,
as is the face, the beard, the gallows;
a petrified tree with prettified leaves.

The torso though is pavonazzetto;
the thin pink veins of which evince
a body, stripped of its skin.

*

Books tell you the Dorian mode,
employed to worship Apollo,
found its expression on lyres –

which the Phrygian mode refused,
using instead music produced
by the reeds – flutes – cut from

the banks of the Marsyas river –
though the loss is not symbolic.
All pain's non-fictional,

based on the true story of pain.
Nature is precise in this.
It hurts as much as it is worth.

★

Also Apollo, the racist, cheated,
and the narrative's loaded by Greeks
who'd chosen the Dorian mode.

This is just the first triumph of the state,
and the death of a human flautist,
whose large head is tilted forwards

and whose face bears such a dread expression
it served Renaissance painters as a template
for their crucifixion scenes – forgetting

of course that Christ sides with Apollo,
with all good sons of awkward gods
intent on implementing father's will.

★

You know the child thought the darkness
some stag that had its horns entangled
in the branches, and thrashed itself in

deeper to exhaustion and protracted death,
or someone from the town come
outside the walls to draw a tally-line

beneath accounts for good this time:
but then he recognised him by
his substantial beard, the solid build,

and when the rug of flies shook out
he understood that all the skin
had been tore from him by some animal.

★

And since it forecasts redressal, the grief
of Christ is inauthentic, dilute with
the largesse of the much better informed.

This is not. Marsyas had only dropped in
to sit by the fire and play like a dream,
the calloused fingers snaking pale darting

flames across the stops. But every tavern
hosts its own dog-killer and herd-god,
its bribe-swallower, its giver of luck –

and having got his pedigree,
having grasped the last injustice,
the mark was taken out the back and stiffed.

*

Having dared a god and lost,
having been flayed alive for his presumption,
the river so-called arose from his blood

and the tears of his brothers and sons –
who have no knife and only starlight.
The youngest climbs, unties the knots

and sets the corpse free. The awful stench.
We wrap him in the swaddle cloths
and lug him uphill to an olive grove

that someone knows, and stack rocks
around the body, and walk back
to a houseful of the vengeful and drunk.

