

On Quarries

Neville Caulfield

I saw thirty-three paintings on Friday.
It was a quiet remedy,
my ankles dripping wet in the open lobby.
My portrait hung, a blue contusion
against walls of crimson and punch
and the spectrum of beautiful petroleum in the two inches
of water on the white tile floor.
On the fourth story, someone else's painting
was every other color I had never known.
I walk back down the stairs on my hands,
my fingernails digging into the marble,
my palms learning and caving
in the shallow flood.

I remember my own brushstrokes,
the tangent lines,
the dizzying rhythm of the absent tides,
new contours on the cartography of ego.

Each mistake is folded twice upon itself
tucked tight to the spine
on the ninety-second page,
flat and viridian,
as the sun barrels down Main,
burning soft spaces between the letters.

*I don't double knot my shoes anymore,
the way the blood rushes to my knees.
The grass is more forgiving now.*

What else could we call this?
The irrevocable tenancy of loneliness,
the empty stirrup
the exaggerated upheaval
of every dog-eared page.

Three days later we reach trial,
the axle and the easel,
and a man with his hand on the edge of the sink
pours three hundred gallons of paint
into an eager drain,
the foundation aching in protest.
The spines hurl themselves from the shelves and

new paintings push their sides into mine,
the new wood teasing the canvas at its corners.

I build what another will break
while the moon rolls tirelessly,
a fitful appeal in the upturned basin of an empty sea.

At two minutes till four
I return to the gallery.
There's a congregation waiting for us outside,
but we lock the doors,
we take our time,
we unlearn.
It's then that we overcome spectacle,
that humming instrument
hot in the basement
tucked behind the kiln.

The brick peels back.
The buildings bruise against one another while
the lake swallows itself whole.
We wring our hands into the river's mouth,
and over the bathroom sink,
and pull paper and pine needles from between our teeth
until the river runs clean.