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ELIZABETH GREENE

Return of the Nobodies

We are the nobodies
 overaged, oversized,
 bulges in the wrong places,
 invisible to judgements' eyes.
 Curves undisguised by flowing clothes
 bodies disjunct from strenuous souls.
 Unseen, we watch and we record.

One by one we're no one.
 Together we're a force.

i

Show me an extra fat cell
 and I'll show you an unkindness
 that's been absorbed and not passed on.

What if Rapunzel had stayed another twenty years in her tower
 with no company besides the ever-souring witch?
 If Beauty's Beast had turned into an ogre, not a prince—
 She'd have to stay careful of the kids, and somethings give.
 Even when the story gets back on track, some changes stay,
 swelling the cells, filling out the skin.

Or take my cat Shekinah, whose careless mother
 Binah was always dashing out to play—
 two kittens died at five and seven days,

butterscotch and calico. First wandering in circles,
finally twitching, sleeping, spent, in a desert
of laundry room rug.
Shekinah, grey silk, golden-eyed, with fringy tail,
fucked by her visiting orange brother at 6 months,
became a teenage mother of four small grey clouds,
one tortoiseshell, lay nursing for a week.
Didn't get up. Ate and nursed.
I'd buy roast chickens, feed her bits by hand,
hold the saucer to her chin so she could drink.

Shekinah's large now, round grey rug,
but she knows she's gorgeous. No one's
told her she can't wear gauzy flowered dresses,
lavender bras. Or that she has to live on cottage cheese.
She did what she had to do: survived.
And all five kittens lived.

ii

Swallowing anger.
I remember when I realized I was doing it.
It must have been a Thursday,
because I'd dropped my son at school,
gone to market, bought six date squares,
had a whole morning to myself,
uncluttered except for the ten thousand things
I had to do. Should I write a novel?
Or essay questions? Prepare my next class?
I wasn't even thinking dust and vacuum.
And I knew I'd end with swimming.
The phone rang. *I can't pick Alan up.*
I've scheduled an extra meeting
with my graduate students.

But I was going swimming.

You can go tomorrow.

But I've got class tomorrow.

Next week then.

Okay, I say, I'll get him.

You can't strand your kid at school
especially when he's throwing tantrums
and you don't know if he'll get through

kindergarten. If I were supposed to meet
the angel Gabriel, George would say,
*It doesn't matter. I've got a tennis game
or conference or I'm going hunting.*
I eat a date square, and another.
Drift around the house. Then another.
I won't write a novel this morning,
not even a page. Thinking of that,
I eat another date square.
George thought we should put Alan
in a school for hopeless kids.
That way we'd each have eight hours a day.
Or even better, in school in Ottawa.
I eat another date square.
My jeans hang reproachfully in the closet.
Too late. I eat the last square, feel sick.
The more my jeans don't fit, the more I close my heart.

iii

Zippers fly open, buttons burst. Comedy unredeemed.
I feel invisible, but not at meals. Then my mother's
disapproving eagle eye revives,
I hear her saying if I eat pancakes or a second ear of corn
or even too much salad or apples in public

I'll deserve all the miseries of the world:

Heart disease, arthritis, fallen arches, strokes,
not to mention cancer. I'll have brought them all on myself.
Don't even think of good bathing suits or romantic love.
I still eat like an addict, trying to cram in
Pleasure and sustenance before they're
ruined by a look or a remark.
Okay, so I'm not one of the chosen,
but being other, I can stand with trees,
lakes, deer, and spotted owls, against
guzzlers of gas and oil, profligate wasters,
with the earth on the other side
of the great chain of being.

iv

After the speeches, poems and champagne
when Caroline retired,

after flambéed shrimp and fireworks,
Leslie says, *Let's go skinnydipping!*
Yes! says Brenda. *Yes!* says Martine.
All right, says Caroline, to my surprise.
Okay, says Annie. *Yes!* says Lyn.
I guess, says Barb, *but not too late.*
I've got to work tomorrow.

I balance on a knife-edge,
weigh the heat of August, full moon,
thought of cooling water,
against the shame. I hesitate.
I'm scared the earth will crack
at the sight of me, even at night,
without my clothes. I'm worried
even the moon will turn away her face.

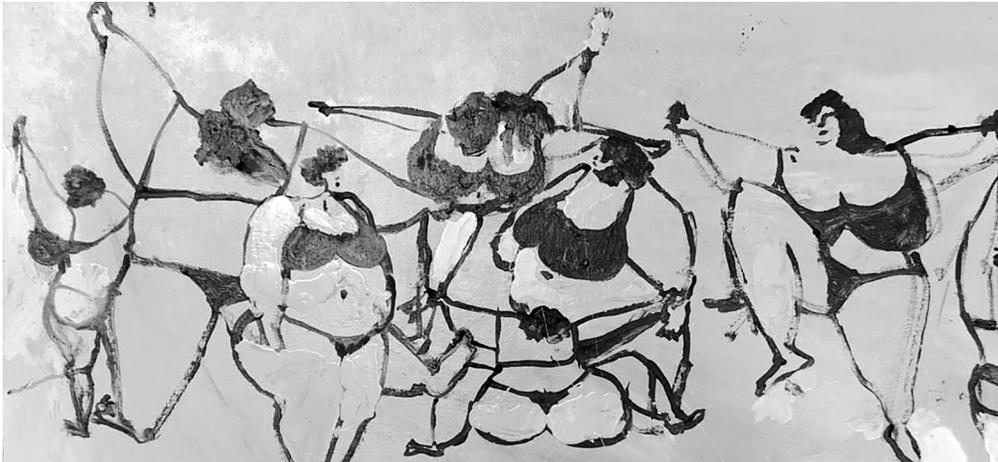
Come on! says Leslie.
Come on! says Martine.
It'll be fun. I won't take photographs,
I promise. Lyn drapes a towel on my arm.
You'll need this when you get out.

It's not far to the lake, a few blocks
through friendly streets in summer-scented air.
Arrived, Leslie strips and plunges,
wine bottle in her hand.
She does that. Once, in Rwanda,
she was stuck in traffic, right near a lake.
She left the car, stripped and swam,
was back before the traffic moved.
It's freezing! she says. *It's gorgeous!*
I wish I had her nerve—or her good body.
Come on! calls Leslie. *Viens,* says Martine,

it's magnifique. Caroline, head and shoulders visible
as she treads water, says in her brisk English accent,
Once you're in, it's lovely.
I turn and take my clothes off quickly,
feel the night. The earth doesn't crack.
The moon keeps shining. The broad bright
Road across the water ripples undisturbed.
At first it's freezing, but I don't want to stand
naked at the end of Maitland Street, so I plunge in.
The lake doesn't recoil, doesn't say I'm dressed wrong.
My skin, moonlit, waterkissed, breasts, belly, hips.
Water lifts me. Moon dusts me.
Pass the wine, says Leslie. Red wine, eight women

naked in Lake Ontario, laughing, swimming.
 We're only quiet when the cops drive up and stop
 at the street's end. We're drinking without a licence, after all,
 and navigating in public less than sober.
 When we get out, I've lost some shame,
 a wall between me and the world,
 It's midnight, but who cares?
 We walk home singing.

Elizabeth Greene has published three collections of poetry, The Iron Shoes (Hidden Brook, 2007), Moving (Inanna, 2010), Understories (Inanna, 2014). She has also published a novel with Inanna, A Season Among Psychics (2018), and has selected and introduced The Dowager Empress: Poems by Adele Wiseman (Inanna, 2019). Her most recent publications are "Land of No Shadow" in Poems from the Pandemic, edited by George Melnyk (Bayeux Arts, 2021) and "Perfect Purple Rose" in You Look Good for Your Age, edited by Rona Altrows (University of Alberta Press, 2021). She taught English at Queen's University for many years, served as Ontario Representative to the League of Canadian Poets, and has edited/co-edited six books, including the award-winning We Who Can Fly: Poems, Essays and Memories in Honour of Adele Wiseman (Cormorant, 1997). She lives in Kingston, Ontario.



S. Kasaei. Oil on Canvas 38 x 80 cm



S. Kasaei. Oil on Canvas 100 x 120 cm



S. Kasaei. Mixed media on canvas 80 x 80 cm