

Ringed by language.  
*And yet.*

JUSTY PHILLIPS

*For love.*

At first I see only darkness and then the silhouette. Matte black and immobile, I join its lines into a shape that appears as two-dimensional horse.

After a few seconds, illuminated momentarily by a passing silver-grey sedan, its score of distended ribs etches diagonal lines into the back of my late-night eyes. A lone, emaciated horse standing on a highway in Tirana. I am transfixed, not by its absent light-dead body but by the backlit landscape of its standing. Yellow-green light from a nearby apartment block hangs from concrete edges, drawing the shape of the horse's undercarriage into the horizon of an imaginary mountain.

So quiet and so still is this air, that I almost do not feel its violence. Drifting in and out of focus, he and I share lines of fuzzy concrete that blur his standing into mine, intermittently.

It is unusually quiet on this highway. Has someone doctored the sound? The muted tones of distant automobiles and barking hounds do nothing to soften my concern. For its welfare.

After a few minutes, another car, this time with horn blaring and blister-white headlights. Only now do I see the horse balancing precariously on just three legs. The fourth, a rear hind leg, it calls quietly up and into its light-filled mountain-scape.

Time and again, my view is obscured by passing trucks that suck the horse's image out of sight. And then back again. Vacillating abstractions, feathers underfoot. This is the violence. This threshold that is not-yet. Rigid, I plead. Please don't fall. Grip my hands and synchronise my breathing to the horse's wavering leg. *Please don't fall.*

What I really want to say is please don't fall while I am watching.

What is failure / incalculable / breathing ground  
/ tender white heart of a cabbage / indivisible /  
metamorphosis / glass-blown lungs / the orbits /  
out of time / gall bladders more valuable than gold  
/ the possibility of touch / latency / societies of  
living holes / some leg weakness / what is a heart /  
vermillion / shuddering / to be always already full /  
the seat of life / and albeit rarely used / of memory /  
to be present / when all else is all else / that infinite  
touch of nothingness / must be a gift / as Moten  
says, to feel the feel / what else? / a stabilising  
recovery / I think I was born this way.

*I am eight years old when my legs first fall from under me.  
It happens in the field adjacent to our house. The field where  
our chickens sleep. Peck scattered corn from dark brown soil.  
I remember his coarse nylon trousers. The broken lining of  
his pocket. Crystalline, friable, acute. I remember that we  
did not stop moving not even as hands passed under clothing.  
I remember looking at the ground, thinking how careful you  
must be to navigate the little mounds of corn feed and shit.  
Thinking how far you would need to dig.*

In all the years that have passed, I have wondered  
if my faltering legs that did not rest that morning,  
knew already that a leg is also a heart. Knew already  
that what falters on the ground never begins there.

If I were a rock or blood sea, I might drill out  
this heart and flood it with something more  
spectacular. More capable. A new kind of touch.  
Perhaps some place for the goldfinches to return.  
I would pay more attention. Be more aware of  
beats that slip away through fingertips, plumage  
and shin. Mouth open to brackish water.  
*I would take more care.*



Beneath the surface, I would swim the grounding lines, a vast system of blood vessels—arteries, veins, capillaries, eel pits and crab dens. For sixty thousand miles I would roam, circumnavigate the organs, slip between the tips of bleaching coral. If I were a pool of crimson blood, or even a glass of it, I would draw the world in sanguine lullaby. Break the lips of every verse with segments of sharp winter orange.

Twelve months ago I was diagnosed with congestive heart failure. I am forty five years old.

I knew it in myself the previous year, somewhere in that vast shoreline of rock and sea. Last Summer I felt my chest tighten. In Autumn, rapid changes in the colour of my skin, as oxygen, in tiny increments, found it harder to reach. Winter brought leg weakness and dizzy spells. Intense afternoon fatigue in Spring.

Heart failure, caused by a diseased and weakened heart muscle, leaves one unable to pump enough blood to meet the needs of the body. *The needs of the body.* When the heart is unable to distribute blood effectively, fluid begins to accumulate in the blood vessels, eventually leaking into the space around the lungs and other areas of the body, causing shortness of breath and swelling. With each beat, less oxygenated blood is ejected from the heart, eventually starving the muscles and organs of the nutrients they need to survive. Submerged. Altering. This body that is nearly drawn. *Full of bite.* And the pigment of fresh water.