

CHRISTOPHER MUNDE

What Was Gentle Has Turned Careful

[Surveying the quiet auditoriums
for effects left behind, my father
is alone at work tonight when he falls
unconscious falls straight down
the aisle stairs to wake standing

beside his daughter's bed at home.
It feels late and like winter it feels
electric and cold like the eve of every
holiday and he's home, his tie still tight
and the house quiet.]

The doctor tells him
to always seat himself
when the dizziness starts
and, unable to afford something better,
he does, and so the next time it comes

he passes right out in an auditorium chair
and dreams he's at someone else's job, bending
to adjust the spray of artificial rain
on three bodies lying
in grass.

[No eyes: Lids only. He tucks
his sleeping daughter in gently, so she stays asleep,
but then he notices the snoring: hers, and
his wife's, the family's breathing, the house
idling.]

He's a pathologist, he realizes,
at a body farm, and rises
from the water spigot, the measured weather
washing him for a second. He doesn't know
if this is how the other pathologists do it, but it's how
he does it.

[Shirt, pants off. In the blue night
of his bedroom, he shakes his wallet onto the bed
and draws out the check from the Canal St. job, then
the cash from the one on West 4th and lays
it all on the nightstand beside his wife.]

The three
in the grass are the surrogates
for a family murdered and found in a park; the three
have only conceptual blood in common, blood-
shed in common. Even my father doesn't know what
they all actually died of.

[He feels
they're like dreams, his wife and daughter, though he is awake,
like this is a zoo for dreams. He knows all he believes about them
was programmed at the moment he entered their rooms:
his daughter had, somewhere, a fourteenth birthday,
his wife wanted the kitchen bigger, the bedroom different.]

He doesn't know if the woman below
really has a child out there, if the girl ever wore
anything like this blue jumper, if
the boy had ever pretended to be someone else,
to be killed, before. [Like seeing dreams

while awake, reasoning them
and the offering on the nightstand barely ruffled
by his wife's breathing. When he woke in two hours, they'd be gone,
dreamlike: daughter to school, for science he knew,
somehow, wife to work at the lab.] These discrepancies

don't register on the time of death, on the physical
matter of decomposition. Look, they look so
much softer today, a red tumble flung together
holding in rain; who wouldn't believe
they had struggled, and loved each other—

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He's letting them be now.

After he's placed
the careful marks he's careful
to fade back to body, auditorium,
the shapes still reclining in his eye—
it's their lids on his eyes—and branding the stage ahead.

He
watches. The processes

[take them.]