

LURE

Like a baked fish splayed sideways in a shallow pan,
garnished with garlic cloves, parsley, my eyes are still

in tact. Cross eyed, blank eyed, other wise.
Small but sharp, my teeth are sharpened

for the platter, a kind of stage, ready for the final
ceremony where I gnash and gnaw at the throat

the slow way down. Raised wild, wild caught, a bluefish
snagged from the depths of the Atlantic, the same kind

you'd fish on a charter ship as a kid, grandfather
by your side. I'm seasoned for the occasion.

Not tasteful, not tasty, bitter and oily, mercurial,
better for a thick stew on a rained out Tuesday.

When I bit the line, I bit hard, the barbed
point like an uppercut through the roof of my mouth,

a whole school of us biting hooked squid, fighting
like all hell. A whole school of us decimated,

sought out, scoring your arms. I left your arms sore.
I made you wait. You felt an immeasurable weight

arching your rod, the line drawn taut. You reeled
and reeled, questioning the not yet caught, the catch to be

all while wondering what waited deep, unseen.
It was me. Bucking downward, sideways, wayward. Pulling

on the pulley. Puling, breathing heavy, you puked on deck.
No captain. No sailor. No efficient deckhand. I lowered

to rise again, my friends gutted in buckets, fuel
for the trailing gulls. Gullible. Can't you see I love you.

MY CHIMERA

Am I dead yet? The sun hangs like an open cut on the forehead, springing upward off the rails, the rails sprinting north and south. Beyond the tracks, a fence overgrown with all the disbelieved incidents, and beyond the fence, the metro platform, a voice on the loudspeaker. I rent the third floor attic apartment in the house behind me. The neighbor below is nosey, wears a bulletproof jacket to work, drives a blue Crown Vic with tinted windows—what was I thinking, I who in my youth, in my early temper used to spray paint QUESTION AUTHORITY on any blank brickwall blanketed with shadows, I who smoke marijuana like a fiend? Knowing that I knew, knowing that I couldn't prove a thing, he followed me for three months until I turned weak, until the elegant chairs strongly recommended I see two shrinks twice a week. And then all the sentences began with "I" and ended with "me." Even when I wasn't speaking. My friends lectured but never listened. My parents aged quicker, fastened gray. And with my eyes pinned, I thinned out like a drying sponge left too long in the high sun. I didn't trust anyone, much less my own senses. I let my hair grow, feeling it as it lengthened. I spoke less and less, I smoked more and more. And then the kind shrinks ran out of questions...

MISCHIEF BLUES

A paint stained easel eating an orange
a cherry ember scrawling smoke signals in wind
two poles inside a chest converging or reversing

A U Haul or a one way plane ticket
the finality of a takeoff her
taking off whatever it is she wore tonight

alone or not alone but still alone in this town
too small for any real separation
She should know I jousting a lamppost

at the easel over and over again I think
it was sexual in a weird sense but if
I was wrong and I was wrong at least

some of that destruction was earned
I mean I was angry about the holding cell
so I broke down the antique desk too her

desk robin blue and then I hauled it out back
with a bunch of kindling and kerosene
I know I was mean the silence I think

was killing me but the flames reached
the lowest branches of the trees and the owls
my only company most nights the owls

stayed away much as she stays away they didn't
peer down from their perch as if
to say something intimate to me like

stay here or don't stay here but stay stay stay
And I was hungry I would've liked to cook
dinner but had no groceries in the fridge

and the city sent another email another
disconnection notice with another week
until payday but I stayed right here making

a fool of myself catching another case
I can't afford and all the while
I thought about trains about changing my name

or learning a different language maybe
Tagalog because I loved her and loved too
to annoy her and what really what

could anyone want from me
when she left but didn't leave entirely

NOCTURNE AFTER WATCHING *AHLAT AĞACI*

A man stands in the window, glass of tea in his hand,
elbow arched, a stern face and if you look beyond
the glass, or behind the glass, to the mirrored landscape,
you see a sea, low whitecaps. What does it mean? A sea

inside the man or a man inside the sea? And nothing
left to be now but who you were and are and will become.
A man. The sea. It could be the window of a ferry.
It could be a seashore tea garden in Türkiye. Straight

in the middle of straits, in between, not here and not there
and nowhere really too specific. In the future's distance,
a grove of pear trees, a basketful of wrinkled fruit, a father
who loves his dog more than god or his son or even

his wife and daughter. Soon winter will come. Soon
the panning shot of a wild pear tree rooted bare, bereft,
not dead but looking like death. You leave the lights on
because at night, knowing tomorrow might not wake,

your chest caves into a well. And when the snow melts,
everything dropped, tossed, left or lost rises
like air. Heavy air. You're alone here, before the rolling credits,
the sound of a pickaxe chipping away against the wall.

MY CHIMERA

You crystallize on a platform, a face inside a cube of ice under the cold sun, watching what? We hang out often but never talk, a wall of air like a border between us, a beam of light slanting into an archway and a friend recently asked me “What brings you joy?” then laughed and said “a cheeseburger...” Music, pot, love—not much else. You watch over my back as I write this, chimera behind glass on a metro platform, and I wait for the call, the text, the message asking whatever it is you want to know. On the coffee table, an open book, a candle, a blank planner. I sit on the couch, a gingham blanket at my feet, and try to read, try to write. Sometimes I try to jack off but the drugs steal my sex drive. Most nights, most days eating is a chore because I’ve whored myself out for too long to an orange pill—what do you want, more? But you’ve probably left by now, back to your own world where there’s no vague idea of a man, no restless shape in hiding, in recovery, in search of another mask knowing it’s not here or there, not in a place, knowing it wasn’t too late but now, not knowing now... And when I turn to face you, chimera behind glass, maskless and mad, when you look into my window at night, do you see your face, or mine?

SELF PORTRAIT AS ANOTHER

Jack Dracula sits at a round table with
a glass of wine, a pack of cigarettes,
circa 1961, New London, Connecticut.
I think his tattoos posed a risk for Arbus,
the rites and rituals of the low down,
because Dracula's marked by a dragon
on his right arm, scorpion on his left,
an eagle covering his chest, some skulls,
and stars scattered across his face. Serious,
a goatee kept close and thick hair pushed back
as if a wind lived in it, even there inside
what I think must be a quiet dive, a weekday,
maybe 12:30 on a Tuesday, as the warm light
strays in through the windows to his right
and Arbus loads the 35mm film cassette,
black and white negative, into the camera.
He's wearing a watch, though he doesn't look like
the kind of person who keeps time, arms crossed
resting on the table, staring into the lens,
as if threatened. Or else, interrogated, timid,
he might run just as quick as he spits in someone's face.
Still young, on his neck in French *Regardez les cours
des submarines*, but what the hell does that mean,
he believes in secrecy? I used to have a friend
covered in tattoos who planned to die handsome
and saw it through, younger than Arbus, I imagine,
in the moment she snapped this photo, and younger
than Dracula as the camera's mechanical sound
arrests his pose, as he tries hard to remain still,
to endure the attention. But I don't know. In his eyes
I see the future play out in a second, and then
I'm not looking at Dracula or the bare scene
around him, but at you, my friend in another life,
looking in to listen... Last night at a bar,
I thought I saw you stand in a beam of light
each time the pianist leaned over to strike
another chord, though the stage was barely lit
and the room was loud, we were almost
alone together in a crowd of ghosts, a house

of people who never had the pleasure to know
who you were, people who can never resemble you...
I can't explain it anymore, yet even if I could,
would anyone understand? In crowded places
I feel more alone than Jack Dracula
looks in this photo. I think he had an eye
for appearance, its limitations, just as you did,
if only because he's donning, in ink,
a pair of trompe l'oeil goggles, as if to say,
despite his persona, that he likes expensive wine
and the opera, or speaks Chinese in his spare time
to no one. *Regardez les cours des submarines.*
We wanted to be imperceptible, simply.
And in the aftermath of the shot, for all I know,
Dracula may have painted a hole in the wall
and split, just as you did—where'd you go?

MAX LASKY

Max Lasky's poems are published or forthcoming in the *American Poetry Review*, *Columbia Journal*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *The Indianapolis Review*, *OxMag*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *SOLID STATE*, and elsewhere. He was the co-founder and editor-in-chief of *Leavings*, a literary magazine that published poetry, prose, and art from 2020 to 2024.