

Punch-Clock Fireworks

Olivia Wolfgang-Smith

Buster Keaton broke his neck and didn't notice.

Maybe that's just the life of a silent clown stuntman: vault and tumble, pulled muscle, eyes lined in ladies' pencil. Torn thumbs, sprained ankles, the ricocheting suspended *flip* of concussion. Occupational hazard. Like a receptionist twinged with carpal tunnel, a president gone grim and gray, an astronaut—sweet farm boy, salutes flag, holds wife's hand—one moonwalk and suddenly a zero-G stumble toward divorce. A difference now, footprints on two worlds.

And Armstrong said, *I guess we all like to be recognized not for one piece of fireworks but for the ledger of our daily work.*

That's all Keaton was up to, really, that day he ran the length of a train and hopped the last car, grabbed at the pipe that blasted him *crack* against the rail. Just a headache, stiff drink; sleep it off, Buster, and back on set tomorrow.

Forty-two years of covert callused fracture and he's dead of lung cancer, this man who slept off a broken neck. And Armstrong, who stood stiff-jointed in the vacuum and inhaled: drifted off, heart surgery gone wrong.

I guess we all like to be recognized not for how long we linger, what gets us in the end, but for the injuries we just refuse: No, thank you, not today, I've got too much ahead of me for a broken neck. Too much yet to do for my blood to boil. We crack our knuckles, get another take. Each bruise and breakage a ledger entry, our daily work a debt, we sleep it off; we stare down space and rocket home.

Olivia Wolfgang-Smith's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Common*, *Cobalt Review*, *CutBank*, *Fourth Genre*, *Necessary Fiction*, and elsewhere. She earned an MFA from Florida State University.