

Marc Harshman

Holding On

There was thunder building behind the mountain but she was in no hurry and the air was so still she knew that what storm would come was in no hurry, either. She swept the porch, knelt to dead-head petunias her daughter had sent in the spring. She undid a second button on her blouse, could feel the sweat pool along the nape of her neck. When it finally came, the breeze was delicious. She sat and spread her legs and breathed: in ... out ... — like yoga, she supposed. The garden was thriving this year. The tomatoes, especially: her Brandywines big as softballs. She hoped there would be no hail. The breeze had already stopped. But she loved these moments of heavy silence before a big storm. Earlier a jay had made two sharp, scrying squawks from the shadows in the tree line but now a few crickets and the slow tumble of the dryer behind her in the basement were all she could hear. Funny to think they'd given her only a couple more months and yet she was sitting here as fully alive as she felt anyone could ever feel. Sure, there was the dull ache in her side and she knew were it not for the meds, she'd not sleep. But ... she *had* the meds and she *would* sleep. And she wouldn't, and wasn't ... going to worry. The first ripple of lightning had just filigreed the left flank of the mountain like a flash for coming attractions and now here was the breeze again. She went ahead and undid the rest of her buttons and slipped off her blouse. How good that was. She felt, she smiled to herself, impossibly, and yet delightfully, amorous. She undid her shorts and slipped them off, as well. There would be storm and thunder, lightning, but there would be, as well, the familiar feel of her body — call it love, this holding on to life within the dull and predictable solemnities of death.

Marc Harshman

Seascape in Kansas

He did not leave the lizard costume behind but took it with him over the mountains. At sunset he came down into the neon lounge of the Glory Motel, down where the walls are festooned like the gardens of Babylon. He meets a girl, well, really a woman trying hard to be a girl, but she listens, and that's good. Deep into his fifth shot of Wild Turkey, he feels the heat off the desert climb the ladder of her tights, climb the meteorological prediction of all the nights there ever were, of all that might be and come true was he to forget his dog tags and leave the windows all open.

The lizards around here are mostly skinks. Skinks are quick with their tongues and harmless mostly, but have left some people unsettled and sleepless. She slips away when they come up out of the sea. Into words and memory. Was that what had happened?

Was I talking about the costume again? Did Albee really mean prehistoric fish? Anyway, most folks think I looked like some kind of lizard. And, hell, I don't even wear it anymore ... it was just a party we had for some of the boys who weren't coming back ... you do those kinds of things in country. Skinks? No, is that what you call them?

She has moved to the other side of the moon, getting lit up so she doesn't have to come down till morning. The kettle drums don't help, either, but it is June and these storms are to be expected, especially under a red roof in a nowhere town south of Canada and north of the Gulf.

He's drinking alone, now, and really it is better. He had never wanted to enlist and it's only right he should have some kind of justice when the world turns upside down and you see, here he is, feet on the ground with a good story, a disguise, and beyond the back door a map for where he might go if he ever wants to disappear again.

And he might need to — what *did* he say to that girl? Mrs. Heath, if you really want to know. The folks around here believe what they're told. They're dangerous that way — he should keep his head down. Watch his back. And remember, everyone's cold-blooded and believes *with fervor*, so don't count on evolution — he *is* in Kansas, everybody is, everybody, believing everything, so keep moving. Blend in ... Like a lizard. Like a fish. Like something quick and scaly. Like something left behind when The Beagle sails off at dawn looking for a friendlier land.

Marc Harshman's second poetry collection is *Believe What You Can* (WVU Press, 2016). His poetry has appeared in *Shenandoah*, *The Georgia Review*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *The Progressive*, and *Emerson Review*. His twelve children's books include *The Storm*, a Smithsonian Notable Book. He is poet laureate of WV.