

KILLING IT

POEMS



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BLACK LAWRENCE PRESS

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KILLING IT

My folks say hoping's good but it'll never save you,
because in our Ohio the best you'll get is broke
televangelists and ravenous churches. My folks
are bootstrap royalty. Crisp in cuffed shirts and gold
wedding rings that flash on a backhand slap. I was the prodigal
daughter and then a prodigy, the child mothers prayed for,
spelling bee queen, good at silence. In town they say we don't
deserve our breath but we call ourselves holy anyway
because even gods have short memories. All my friends are bored
waitress girls who fold tips in their skirts like scriptures
and touch up smudged lipstick at the altar of convenience
store bathrooms. We line our cheeks with drive-through
grease and never talk about our bodies. Wait in the backseat
for a damp god. Like all good disciples, we are grateful
for our unmaking. We neon we bleeding leaving
one by one for the redeye shift. My folks believe
in lotteries, not failures. The opposite of dead
is exemplary. They believe this every time they abandon me
kneeling at their beauty, their model, their myth. My folks know all
that is holy is only a failure of distance; white man,
far enough away, turns to god. Sometimes
when people say I'm killing it I remember everything
exemplary I know or ever will traces back to a small girl
on the floor praying *please, please, can you save me*

OHIO

At fifteen, you're not freckled, not blushing, not brave enough to scale the fence or let your mother see you love a girl, so you hold out for senior year in the arcade, where the worlds before ours ended, you play pinball with a girl who could've loved you and feel like a murderer, take this fear into your hips, your hands, your name, hide it in your bedroom where you chew the ballpoint pen you borrowed from the science fair you lost in second grade as you listen to success stories of conversion therapy in New York. You barely remember when your mother found a poem you'd hidden in your backpack about a girl at school and left the lights on for four nights straight, looking at you like you were monstrous or dead, and finally, you drove together through highways in silence and she put the radio on and you skipped the station whenever you heard a curse word, and when you pulled back into the driveway she said, quietly, *you are not one of them*. All you remember is when you were six and she taught you how to swim, and you were so good at it, you barely needed lessons, until she took you to real water, the currents forcing you down and down, you helpless and clawing for air in Ohio's deepest lake, the same way you gasped crying

on a park bench, harder when a stranger promised
it always gets better, neither of you believing it.

BEARINGS

*In the myth of Thessalonike, a young girl walks
into the sea after her brother's death, intending to
die, but becomes a mermaid instead.*

By then I could hear water everywhere—in the walls,
in my knees, under the stone slabs of my bathroom,

in my lover's arched ear. My hair never dried.
I kissed her, tasted salt. Once again I resolved to live

needing less. Peeled each wrinkle
from my fingers and didn't wince. At night,

I practiced holding my breath, standing in rain,
water flinching from my boots. Alone

in the dark, I yelled my lover's name, voice blurry
and blooming like some primordial squid. I was free

to love anything I wanted, though I didn't
love her. Though every night next to her I dreamt myself

something terrible—viperfish, lamprey, mutant
shark—and I broke the surface, fled back

to my dark ooze of a body, praying by morning
she wouldn't remember my older, softer skin

HEAVEN

Once, there was only flesh eating flesh eating flesh. Efficient. Once, a taxonomist wanted to know if women were engineered to perform labor, so he exhumed teeth, sewed them into a girl. In an empty room,

I watched a rocket stall, then take off elsewhere. The taxonomist sent his daughter to the factories, and she worked until her fingers rotted, until her jaws unhinged

to reveal radioactive cogs, and she opened and opened and opened. A matter of willpower: the creatures evolved teeth, wrapped their jaws around the necks

of prey, bit down and did not draw sound. The daughter glistened and once again became useful. We clutched her bones like lanterns and bounced light off the walls of the factory. I applauded

the rocket's extraordinary progress, alone in the dark, watching the machinery's steel grow like a wound and open and open. The taxonomist plucked out my eyes to understand

my negative thoughts. His daughter screamed in her narrow house, grew a second spine, a new mouth. The creatures killed their ancestors with efficient guns;

they lasted through the difficult winter. I knelt at the blood of my better selves, selves I killed with my bare beautiful hands,

and wept. The taxonomist named the experiment a success. He opened his daughter, and found so much husk, so little blood, you wouldn't believe.

SIMPLE MACHINES

At eleven, I stole a lisp from my parents—slipped
past silent seams of brick, past slouching yards

and surveilling fields, past the stray dog still wearing
its owner's collar, past the trappings of dead

animals and the splintering lanterns in perfect
hunting lodges, past the people and their economies

of sweat and the gym called Manifest Your Destiny
into the speech classroom's projector spotlight. There's more steel

in English than you would believe. In my textbooks,
men invented new machines to turn people

into ghosts, to sheathe our senses in fresh
blood. The woman in speech class asked all

who hadn't broken their mouths yet to circle
the nouns. Mark the verbs. Buck the horse. Stolen

accent evidence of stagnancy. A cycle
of innovation: pulley into crank into guillotine.

The inventions grew more beautiful, more
deadly: artful casket, gorgeous cage. I learned

how to speak so they could ruin me, an imitation
of a voice. All of this is progress. I excelled

in speech class, my mouth rinsed clean with white
heat, controlled vocabularies of so much blood. On days

I can't speak, this is where I go: interrogation
room, gunmetal smile. Grateful machines. The coldest tongues.

PRODIGY

They tilled the fields after the best harvest yet
and dredged the dead bodies up. *Channel the fear,*

the orchestra conductor screamed: we learned Bach,
left the stage to plunge our fingers

into the dark. We played a restaurant where, four years ago,
a man bludgeoned his wife and fled

to Iowa. The dogs found the wife—an oak shoved her
into the yard. The concertmaster Alice hid from her voice

in the corn, escaped her ghosts and the living
corpses of this town until she ran,

bleeding, white-hot, into herself—
gone. The murderer's wife was blue-haired and

Asian and beautiful and pregnant and seventeen.
I sat in the back of the orchestra

and played harmony, Alice's lipstick still smeared
on my teeth. No one could hear me

when I wept in my mother's house. The light burst
through the window and tried

to slit my throat. They found another corpse in the fields
and I dreamt of running, changing my name to Awe

and shearing off my hair with a butcher knife,
asking for mercy on a highway. Cue the violins.

I auditioned for concertmaster, failed again.
Played more harmonies as my friends grew old,

and they were buried around me. When I finally die
I will be the most convenient ghost.



GAIA RAJAN is the author of the chapbooks *Moth Funerals* (Glass Poetry Press, 2020) and *Killing It* (Black Lawrence Press, 2022). Her work is published or forthcoming in the 2022 Best of the Net anthology, *The Kenyon Review*, *THRUSH*, *Split Lip Magazine*, *diode*, *Palette Poetry*, and elsewhere. Gaia is an intern at Poets House, journal editor for *HalfMystic*, and web manager for *Honey Literary*. You can find her online at gaiarajan.com and @gaiarajan on Twitter and Instagram.