

B R I A N P A L S

Something about an eyelash

What would you say a centipede was?
Nervous, but I mean what did you used
to call them? Something about an eyelash.
It was dog-hot down in Tarawa Terrace
when we lived on-base that summer, remember?
The roaches were one thing, greazy scuttle-bugs
I'd swear were big as upturned ashtrays.
But after you caught that night-job slinging Bud Light
to buzz-cuts on Court Street, you'd draggle back
in soul-sore need of a soak. I'd be dead asleep,
two hours from reveille, and you'd yell
like somebody stuck you with a poker.
Puddling the banked corners of the bathtub,
primitive slug-bodies on combs of whisker.
Tap the nozzle and two more tickle out.
Touch them and they turn to twitchy smudges
of silt-gray gore. Flooded, they'd soften
and disintegrate sickeningly. Uselessly,
as best could be seen. Like a lot of things
happening between or within us after
that wedding we staged to tease out the benefit
dependent units got when the eagle shit.

We'd fucked around on one another,
so blatant it didn't bear mention. Truth told,
we had uglier fish to fry. I wasn't making jack,
because, I told myself, you wouldn't give up drugs.
Like it was your fault I finally dropped dirty.
Busted me to PFC after six years in the suck,
and I was stuck with a truck payment and cable.
Something had to put grub on the table,
so you moonlit. As good, you told yourself
and especially me, as whoring at the corner.
Grope and eye-rape all night long at the club,
and you'd come home with a headbuzz full
of Def Lep, *uh-fuh-fuh-Foolin'*, hymn of the girls
who worked the pole, all pulling twice your pay.
We weren't fooling anybody, least of all ourselves,
but fam-housing at Camp Lagoon wasn't quite hell
in that interim, post-Lebanon, post-Grenada,
pre-Balkans and Gulf-One. We even had the tub,
so you could shrug off your regulation push-up,
once I'd stumbled in to squish the critters,
and sink through a crust of soap-bubbles
into scaly water that scalded almost cold.

Something was wrong at the source-well,
common knowledge from Filipina scuttlebutt
on up to probably the Commandant.
It was pink in bright light and it stank,
but we drank that agua down with dumb trust.
It tasted like dull rust, and what chugged
from the spigot just before the gush was worse
in its way than Carolina swamp gas, somebody
stewing rank cabbage in sweatsock suds.
Organic compounds had leeches in, later said,
but you never brought the scent of them to bed
with you, and believe me I'd have known.
We'd lay face-to-face, too humid to spoon,
and your bathed odor would wake me, penetrated

by the patinated copper in your waiting iris.
We hardly ever didn't do it, give us that,
love made of little more than naked chemistry.
"Halogenated hydrocarbons," I read eventually,
must have been poisoning you then,
halos burning in the tears and sweat
with which we wet the best hour of our days
fighting hard against the parting of our ways.

Your sleep and my formation could wait.
Loved up once, knowing I'd be late again, I rolled
my eye at him ghosting toward the ceiling,
old centipede. Wanting you to not freak,
I eased upright and tried to do the bad deed
without you catching on. Splat, you did,
and a shower of tiny legs slip-slid across the nylon
of the unzipped sleeping bag, government issue,
that we used as a bed-spread. Not to be morbid,
but we could call that moment the end of it.
It wasn't long we'd read and digested
the plot of that watery smear on the wall.
Years, and you'd been buried when I got the call.
I tried not to mourn. To get a little bit morbid,
you don't really lose what you willfully let go.
The hurt I'll allow is for certain specifics though.
The names you gave things. One morning
the drag of your eyelash across my nostril
pulled a thrill through me as liquidly fragile
as the cuticle that holds in heart-muscle
when it gets old. I must have told you that, right?
If you were here I know you'd swear I didn't.

BRIAN PALS is a Marine veteran and a Master's candidate at the University of Northern Iowa, where he works in production at *North American Review*.