

## CONSTANTINE CONTOGENIS

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*Bourn*

One day, just like that, I could whistle.  
With facts for courage, I challenged girls

to fast games of Whistle Stop. Inspired  
by reading Russian fiction to be

more and less alive, I learned how to  
faint—first, hyperventilate, then don't

exhale, think CO<sub>2</sub>. Coming to  
the proof of having stopped, restarted,

I put off aging a while. Later  
in life, applying for insurance

against early death, getting screened for  
possible causes, being assured

I was not, as I thought, my left arm,  
I watched the needle nuzzle, bite, drink

deep. Ashamed to have stopped and started  
involuntarily, I woke up,

daring the doctor to decipher  
body signs: my neck-veins loud with blood

flushing CO<sub>2</sub> out of my brain.  
Knowing the cracked code by heart, he read

slogans into the walls of my veins:  
resist blood flow, give pressure its way.

He gave me the six weeks he'd foreseen  
to feel my old self, to beat my heart

so fast it would slow near the finish  
line, keep on slowing, take forever

to cross. Expecting to feel that line  
again, I recalled that close-up shot:

three French POWs running  
slowly through snow while the camera

pulls to a wider angle: three small  
dark figures—moving?—yes, left to right

across the white screen, the Austrian  
frontier. Crackling rifle fire echoes,

suffocating quickly in the snow.  
When the music reaching crescendo

turns out to have been the finale,  
I recall no break in the white screen.

I'm forced to believe the escapees  
are not in Austria any more;

though still buried under old snowfalls,  
the border has the power to be

crossed so that the three distant soldiers  
come to be among the neutral Swiss.