
MAXINE SCATES

The Patient

The ghost dogs splash
through the puddles. It's early fall, the hillside mown,
two trees, one maple, one oak, grow only as trees
can in the open, perfectly symmetrical. The harvest
is over and the girls and boys
who drive the bouncy combines down
the main street of Harrisburg are back in school.
I read Lucretius because I like the way
he says *Nothing comes from nothing* so emphatically
though half awake at dawn I understand how some days,
even as they sowed the seeds Lucretius believed in,
they saw the gods in their own image, their garments
dragging through the clods of earth
as they crossed the ploughed fields against the bright
and empty sky—the gods that would, in turn, pay them no heed
because they thought them stupid mortals
which is, I think, how we came to hate ourselves. Now
Lucretius makes me happy as beating up my father
did not all those years ago when the one who said
I'm all you've got told me to tie him to the chair
and put the ball cap on the broomstick knob of his head
while she stuffed the old shirt with newspapers, then
gave me the bat and told me to hit him,
who was by then an old man. I did so willingly
until the cap fell off and the newspaper guts
spilled to the floor and she told me I needed to be held.
For a long time after I did not understand why
when she held me I felt as abject as my dog
who cowered when my father entered the room.