

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Nicole Rollender: Four Poems

Nicole Rollender · Wednesday, February 10th, 2016

Nicole Rollender has published her work in *The Adroit Journal*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Best New Poets*, *The Journal*, *THRUSH Poetry Journal*, *West Branch*, *Word Riot* and others. Her first full-length collection, *Louder Than Everything You Love*, was published by ELJ Publications in 2015. She's the author of the poetry chapbooks *Arrangement of Desire* (Pudding House Publications, 2007), *Absence of Stars* (dancing girl press & studio, 2015), *Bone of My Bone*, a winner in Blood Pudding Press's 2015 Chapbook Contest, and *Ghost Tongue* (Porkbelly Press, 2016). She has received poetry prizes from *CALYX Journal*, *Ruminate Magazine* and *Princemere Journal*.

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## The Return

*for Florentine Bia*

I've imagined my great-grandmother in love,  
 her hands deep in a pig's meat she was rolling  
 into sausages. Blood's aldehydic stench. Large clocks  
 laughing all over the house. Massive dark beds. Her long dress  
 licking the top of her foot. She remembered the geese  
 her mother strangled, the sound a whine just before  
 the final breath, the first time they made love. I didn't exist.  
 I wonder if she felt her own death, her hands limp  
 on the bed after, the wind pulled out of her,  
 if when she finally spoke, *look at the starlight,*  
*look,* her voice meeting that light would carry forward  
 to this day, when I say aloud, *Florentine, Florentine,*  
*we are both alive in this poem,* my hands deep in tomato hearts,  
 the man I've chosen to love somewhere in the garden,  
 his words still vibrating: What you do is wake  
 the dead. You don't let them sleep.

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## Visitations

It was a laugh, unspooling from the last century.  
 It hung, shimmering curtains above my mind—

when I sit to write, the apparitions bow inside  
 the door smelling of the cold, the deep earth where  
 light freezes on eyelashes. They remember being lifted  
 from the wells of their mothers' bodies—hair  
 slick with vernix. I ask, what exactly is it we  
 can sacrifice—this quiet room where I hold a pen,  
 my belly two children parted like a sea  
 and stepped out—if we could dissect our own bodies  
 with silver knives, untying the ligatures that bind  
 our bones to the lives we've led—if we eat a pear  
 starting to turn, its sweet rot a pain we can't forsake,  
 a love that divides the spine—a love like cutting a white  
 onion, my eyes shining with tears I endure and write,  
*O, a forest is burning.* My children run in the yard,  
 and I write again, *how dark was it inside of me when you  
 were weightless?* The dead voices tinkle, breaking  
 on the floor, a skip and repeat: *hallow, hallow, hallow.*  
 Sometimes I fill the sink with water, try to see  
 my face, wondering which of my lives is the real one.  
 Which life is the flawed glass I see a doe through?  
 Her patient eyes blur back as black water—her leg  
 is bitten and she will die here—as two holes through  
 which my hands could slip. One child will soon veer  
 back toward the house, sunlight in her hair—her laugh  
 caught by the next century—my stretched ligaments  
 creak, as an apparition climbs my interior stairs,  
 humming, as if to comfort me, as if to deepen my wounds,  
 —as if to be the mother who places her teeth on my wrist  
 and growls: *Coyotes in these woods will chew you to the bone.*

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## Aperture

Who can tell the difference between the forest and a lantern—  
 the flame turning its red eye against the glass, caught.  
 Because I've carried a doll's cracked head in my right pocket,  
 its open mouth boiling over with a calm light,  
 an unheralded light that traveled through an ice age to land  
 here, I say to you, *I mourn no one.* I can live cold. Holding  
 this head over and over to memorize wanting him, a wanting,  
 to remember touching bones, his black eyes doors  
 to a sea where I clutched the rails of a ship—  
 wanting this particular shadow, the outlines of the miraculum  
 that flowered out of his irises,  
 a path back to my body in damp grass,  
 this hammering of what it is to really be desperate,  
 to will a heart to speak, speak—

hold a light so briefly that was never meant to be mine.

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## Something Breaks When Your Body Fails Your Children

In the dark, small hands clapping. A broken-necked swan,  
her neck folded in eternal origami. The truth, my dead grandmother told me, is our bodies are haunted, whether we invite it or not. By canaries who sing a last song to save the living—who sing—a spirit that can't bear to live outside its skin, the way her body in its green dress won't live outside the dirt it's buried so tightly in. I imagine dying—a cocooning back into my own mother, dropped into the heart of her, a field where what's plowed is unplowed overnight. I imagine my mind the color of what I hate most about myself, that I'm always fighting to climb out of this body—my daughter did, so why can't I—my grandmother said the dead forget their names for a while. And I replay the story again, when I was a child watching spirits walk the walls, crying for blossoms made of water or light—because that's how easy it was to cure sadness then—I know the doorway: that light opening to a field the size of the sea with the same movement where souls hang as fruit, where women rock bellies of jumbled limbs. The departed don't ask to enter my body. They just slip in, to touch again: sand, moving water, persimmons, alfalfa. They string fireflies back through my skin, so they only leave a tiny sting. These babies who came early cusped on that doorway, blooming on a half-lit pond. I saw the faces  
of those hungry, dead mothers who rocked them with webbed hands, a pale circling until they crossed over into my arms. The way a lover bent me under a willow, as if I might fall. The way these falterings flare and leave a gasp that scars, cleave me to this world. I just want to lay my head on something real grown out  
of the earth I'll return to, so I won't feel so alone, when I cry for everyone I'll outlive—headless, already squawking in my pelvis.

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