

4-15-2017

Understudy

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Recommended Citation

Abell, Steven (2017) "Understudy," *The Oval*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol10/iss1/10>

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UNDERSTUDY

STEVEN ABELL

The medications the doctors give Anna, I also swallow.
I snore in a room down the hall—counting cloud and bird.
I keep asking the docs to wire my jaw shut; they laugh
and they tell me if I keep it up they just might.

I fall in and out of character, studying scars, topography
of a farm-accident story. Ponder the role of the gullet
in talk therapy. My incisions heal; bulge under stitches.

I explain to the head shrink how I rehearse with Anna,
at suppertime, an avante garde play I've agreed to never write
when we finally leave the tall pines of St. Eusebius.

The quack asks me if I'm angry I'm in the hospital. I know
next to nothing about the surgeries that connect Anna to me:
titanium; burr holes so our brains could breathe and atrophy.

The soul-pincher tests me by asking me what makes me happy.
I say loud traffic and cigarettes. Larkin. Golf on television.
She asks whether the slow pace of the game soothes me.

Pushed to the cafeteria, for dinner, I'm sick
of being bent like wire, into strange shapes,
by strangers, and I'm in no mood for theatre.

I twist a fork into oily noodles. Pick at grilled cheese.
Sip cold milk. Ignore the metallic iceberg. I see a young man
(paralyzed from the waist down for a bike trick)
squeeze mustard onto a hot dog.

A man falls down a flight of stairs to husky cheers. A nearby jazz club
club
borrows a neighboring building's naked bricks to project a silent
movie.
I don't have a sober second to myself, here, and even if I weren't
consigned

to never draw and quarter these vertiginous days into a script, I
could never find
competent actors willing to perform on a stage built to hardly hold
their weight.
I sulk and watch my play: trauma and his bald mother crowd the
dark windows;

thunder rises from beneath

our slippers. I operate two conceptual spots, fill days with darkness,
a light
blue director, writer, understudy, cinematographer, solipsist sans
assistant:

I would not make love this hard without any help:
Anna is parked against a wall and sucks her roast beef dinner
through a straw.