

Joan Colby -- Two Poems

The Lungs

Soaring like turkey vultures
On the updrafts, effortlessly,
Beneath notice, how the diaphragm
Squeezes them into the gymnastic
Arts of expiration, inspiration.
Bald red pistons. Fraternal twins.

A cigarette butt discarded on our drive.
Someone whose lungs are scarred
As if lashed at the mast. The coughing fit,
Morning hack and spit. A woman
In the restroom taking a final drag. Tomorrow
The surgery. She still loves it
The way a beaten woman loves the man
Who weeps drunkenly in her lap
Swearing he'll stop.

The lungers; Keats, Mansfield, Lawrence,
Doc Holliday. The white plague
Of the Magic Mountain. Camille
On her chaise. The Bronte sisters
Coughing up roses.

Rose, after the transplant, buying a pack
Of Viceroy's. The new lungs won't last
More than five years in any case.

Sudden clot like a bullet.
The gasps, the shortened breath, the man
In the next bed demanding
A cigarette, lungs black with cancer.

Pneumonia, the old man's friend,
Settling in like a vagrant
In a foreclosed house
Pulling a wooly blanket over his head.

O bellows of existence.
The ins and outs. The dreaded spot
Or the vast capacity
Of the long-distance swimmer.

The lobes pumping your calves
To cycle uphill struggling
For breath. Breath in the alveoli circling
Like a kettle of vultures.

Say it. The old word. Buzzards
Perched on the bedrail as you draw
The last rattling lungfull.

The Muscles

Pumping iron to steel,
Biceps into chunks of ore,
Breastplates of pectorals,
Titanium grip of quadriceps.
The gym clangs with barbells,
Treadmills, Metallica
Blaring into headphones.

Little mouse: slow twitch
Of a tail dense with capillaries
And patience. Fast twitch
Of whisker as the cat approaches,
A dash beneath the cupboard.

Smooth snaky muscles of the involuntary
Systems: digestion, inspiration, heart.
Skeletal muscles bulging with locomotion.
On steroids, a tide of lactic acid.

Bundles within bundles like
Russian dolls to hold the framework
In perfect contractions.

A gene on the X-chromosome
Weakens the muscles in a procession
Of failures until the legs give out,
Eyelids droop, even the lungs
Cannot inflate.
The dissolving fibers
As if a macramé hanging
Had been shredded by ravens.

But we go on sheathed
In mesodermal layers while
Hammers pound and pound
The anvil of the heart:
Workhorse of the body.

Joan Colby has published widely in journals such as *Poetry*, *Atlanta Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *the new renaissance*, *Grand Street*, *Epoch*, and *Prairie Schooner*. Awards include two Illinois Arts Council Literary Awards, Rhino Poetry Award, *the new renaissance* Award for Poetry, and an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship in Literature. She was a finalist in the GSU Poetry Contest (2007), Nimrod International Pablo Neruda Prize (2009, 2012), and received honorable mentions in the *North American Review's* James Hearst Poetry Contest (2008, 2010). One of her poems is a winner of the 2014 *Atlanta Review* International Poetry Contest. She is the editor of *Illinois Racing News*, and lives on a small horse farm in Northern Illinois. She has published 14 books including *Selected Poems* (FutureCycle Press). *Selected Poems* received the 2013 *FutureCycle* Prize. *Properties of Matter* (Aldrich Press, Kelsay Books), *Bittersweet* (Main Street Rag Press) and *The Wingback Chair*, (FutureCycle Press). She has two chapbooks forthcoming *Ah Clio* (Kattycompus Press) and *Pro Forma* (Foothills Press) as well as a full length collection *Ribcage* (Glass Lyre Press). Colby is also an associate editor of *Kentucky Review* and FutureCycle Press.