

Paul Allen

Last Words Looking Back

I may have my foot looked at,
the diabetic next door says, then lets
the VA prune him back to infancy,
shows the people he knows
toes gone, papaya ankle, weekly blood receipts.
Then one day the leg.
Then everything follows.

I may have my foot looked at.
It happens. One day, for one thing or another, we say
our own words for what they really are—or will be
years from now: *Well now this shit's tied down*
we can move on up, says our divorced aunt
who never climbed with us again
and then moved in with Linda.
What did she know—did she know?—
behind the words, looking up,
brushing the thighs of her jeans?
What did she truly say when she said,
From here on out it won't be bad at all?

It's not last words that matter much—
et tu, Brute; light, more light;
I owe a cock to Aesclepius,
will you see that the debt is paid?—
It's last words looking back,
announcements in a tongue
you only come to hear or understand
years later as years ago, finally clear.

Say, you're in your 40s on your way
to the hardware store: You say:
I won't be gone long and you blink
in the flash of your past at the pond
Philip drowned in, shallow pond,

laced to the land like a make-do patch
through the grommets of bream beds
where you and Philip would meet, fish,
and your thirst (or lack of luck) would draw you up
to the old couple's trailer and shed.
They'd let you drink from their well.
You'd sack the hall closet to fondle their guns
with the taped grips or shortened stock,
animal calls dry with white salts from their lips.
You were 17, a virgin, and while you were there
you didn't care. The day you were swimming
and you moved the bow of the boat, you lost him.
Among the storm clouds of the bottom,
arms out, legs reaching for a foot, for something familiar,
you couldn't scream or cry. Your hands touched
your own leg in a turn
and despite what you wanted to know,
you came up, came out naked without him,
dripping in algae and mud.
The old couple met you, wrapped you
in their matching jackets—
I won't be long, this is the wrong damn size and you close the
door.
Which means—for some odd reason,
after all your life of diving under—really means
it's over. You don't have to find Philip any more.