

## My Old Man

By Ryler Dustin

When you're young, love rests awkwardly against your stomach,  
wears a red hat, has your left lung tied to its wrist like a blue balloon  
but my love wheezes like an old man when it sleeps.

When it sleeps, I cannot sleep.  
When it's awake, I'm even worse for sleep.  
The old man keeps me up. He rocks in his old chair,  
cursing and asking someone to feed the cats.  
There are no cats in my chest. The old man is crazy.

I took away his typewriter because the keys kept me up all night  
but now he scratches poems on the inside of my tongue.  
I don't know how he gets up there.  
He writes poems to strangers just to fuck with me.  
He writes poems to big-breasted women.  
He writes poems to the bodies of women  
and forgets to put the women in them.  
He writes poems to men with business suits on  
who have forgotten their stories aren't boring,  
to old ladies crossing the street  
and lovers crossing themselves against what their skin wants to do,  
to the ones who rush into love too early,  
knowing it will not last, praying Lord keep me  
strong and lonely through all of this  
so it does not hurt when I rip pleasure  
back out of my body.

My old man laughs like a grandmother with a shotgun  
blowing my poems out of the sky – *Not good enough! Not good enough!*

He's more like a leprechaun than a cupid.  
He falls in love with buildings.  
He falls in love with what people leave behind them:  
new hairpins and old architecture and apple cores.  
He hoards apples in my chest  
and now my chest is full of apples.  
My chest is growing into a tree.  
Trees are aching inside of it like it's a concrete pot  
and the old man is swinging from the branches, yelling Give me back my typewriter,  
you stupid fuck, look what you are doing to yourself!  
so I swallow harder and type for the both of us.

I type love poems to my mother that say Thank you for the days  
you smiled like a broken fountain  
and put my problems first.  
I type love poems to my sister that say When you have died  
I will go to your hospital bed  
and mark where heaven was planted.  
I type love poems to my father that say This poem is clearly-phrased  
and technical. It is not over-concerned with aesthetics.  
This poem reads books like *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.  
It's like a raft from a desert island  
or a boy whose father beat him until he joined Vietnam.  
It survives no matter what.  
Hopelessness crosses this poem's mind but not its heart.  
This poem hopes with all its crossed heart for life.  
This poem drinks principles, Father.  
This poem coughs on itself, Father.  
This poem coughs on itself because it's trying to be bigger  
than the man who birthed it, but it's just these slung-up words,  
just these makeshift words slung up in the mouths of strangers  
to prop them open and let the light out,  
this poem is broken on your knee, Father,  
take it up like a necklace, like a wire box,  
like a birdcage, like something functional,  
like a sniper rifle, like divorce counseling  
and place it on your shelf between *The Power of Now*  
and *How to Forgive your Abusive Parent*  
or inside the cover of *How to Forgive Your Alcoholic Father On His Deathbed*  
*then Raise your Children the Way He Should Have*, the way you did,  
take it into your arms the way you did,  
teach this poem to forgive itself so it will stop beating me up from the inside,  
hold it softly in your hands like a brittle leaf,  
like a sunset you could eat like an orange,  
like the apples in our backyard,  
like the trees in our backyard you used to prune for us every summer,  
like every summer igniting into autumn  
in our chests  
in licks of red flame and copper wire  
and piano notes I want to hang for you in the sky.