

PETER COVINO

## THE RIVER

In the dream of the river, the sound of water  
Rushing, water roaring: sounds  
Like animal sounds, human sounds, both:  
You have loved me too well and not enough . . .

I can't smell the water in spite of its murkiness—  
Curious, since I'm so close I can see mud  
Moving over water, water over mud.

Whenever he wanted, he'd beat her,  
Because dinner was late;  
She cooked him rice again.

He especially hates rice, reminds him of war  
Paltry meals where Ingrid visited his bunk  
Slinking past S.S. guards promising favors  
Lavender negligées, embroidered slippers—

just to sneak him sugar—so the rice tasted like sweet ricotta.

In the fourth dream, chemotherapy:  
A cancer patient, a client from work,  
The smell physically lingers:  
I can't clear it from memory

. . . *it was as if the shame of it must outlive him—Kafka*

To clean him you say? Use warm water.  
Because he's uncircumcised.  
& *how* did you punish yourself afterward?  
Afterward.

In the field where I'm running, being chased  
Tiring, I can't bring myself to stop,  
I can't decipher my surroundings clearly.

My running is a film alternating backgrounds.

In the dream of the faceless woman,  
Her voice forms slowly out of the darkness of air.  
She's lying beside me not protesting my advances.  
This absence of protest startles me.

When I dress in drag  
He thinks I'm my sister  
I like flirting; I don't feel so bad.

In the first dream I'm on a playing field,  
Running, running  
& being chased  
By someone I don't know.

The field is vaguely familiar, slopes  
Upward from tennis courts,  
That haven't been used in a while.  
The field is moist.

My feet slip, my body becomes heavy.

*You hate yourself?*  
*You don't hate yourself.*  
You work hard to support a family.

On the field where the dreams begin  
To intersect, I'm struggling, running  
Harder, battling the inevitable convergence  
Of rivers, bodies of water

seek each other out.

*Water, yes, water is allowed.*

I'll think I'm my sister,  
When I dress in drag.  
It won't hurt me much . . .

In bed with the faceless woman,  
I admire her lush, full body,  
not unlike a Veronese painting  
& just as lifelike or unlikelike.

The woman whispers to me  
from the blank space  
where her face should be.  
She's telling me something urgent,

An insistent hush.  
Her voice & the invitation of her body  
Dissonant.

I am not running away from anyone  
I'm trying to outrun an opponent as if in a race,  
Though I don't know  
Who the opponent is.

I'll be a flirt; I'll let him touch me  
But not call me names.

The river frightens me also.

In the drowned river my youngest sister calls to me  
For help and the river is louder now.  
I can hear it, feel the rush  
& I can hear my sister calling out my name—

My mother sometimes fought back,  
But she'd bruise easily  
& lie to her Chinese co-workers  
at the dress shop;

As a threat, you don't eat.  
You say you know *how* to suffer.  
To cleanse yourself.  
You don't bathe?

*They* ate rice every day  
In delicate bone-china bowls,  
Rice with Chinese vegetables,  
Water-chestnuts, Chinese spinach, snap-peas.

The cancer patient, from work,  
Talked non-stop about death today  
& the faceless woman in bed asks me  
To hold her tighter. But I don't

Because this closeness  
Will drown both of us,  
Although we're not in the river and my sister *is* in the river,

Becoming more distant, spiraling out of sight.