

PANIC RESPONSE

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ALSO BY JOHN MCCULLOUGH

POETRY

Reckless Paper Birds (Penned in the Margins, 2019)

Spacecraft (Penned in the Margins, 2016)

The Frost Fairs (Salt Publishing, 2011)

Panic Response

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Penned in the Margins

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for Morgan and my parents

Panic Response

Glass Men

Brain tissue inside a man's skull at Pompeii had turned to glass
through heat.

When my head is molten, I hide with ice packs near an electric
fan.

A therapist suggests my overworking began as a way to please a
disappointed father.

Charles VI of France believed he was made of glass.

I have no wish to blame my father, who has his own private
volcano.

When glass fractures, the cracks leap faster than 3,000 miles an
hour.

My father's running medals hibernate in boxes on a shelf.

In fight-or-flight mode, blood gushes to muscles, hyperventilation
flaps its shadow.

My body prepares to race north to the Arctic, across the sea.

The smartphone may be said to function as an apex predator.

No shelter withstands repeated storms of ash.

Laying the predator facedown will not save anyone.

To build a short-term haven, I inhale slowly, sweeping arms
above my head.

At my best, I end text messages to Dad *love John*.

Small refuges with walls of air can, on occasion, seem enough.

I write this while my hands are shaking.

J

And so it starts, though I cannot.
Despite my being unable to say the first words
there is a voice doing it, this not-speaking.

There are risks. Even now, Marie Curie's notebooks
are so radioactive no one can hold them.
Likewise, there are phrases that I (whoever this is)
am reluctant to approach, to slide from their lead-lined box
in case my skin candles to green, words I cannot form
without a chance of my teeth falling out.

Books can kill you. I know this.
I read and read and woke one night with a clawed hand
squeezing my brain. I stumbled to the bathroom
past a tower of loans from a library's Renaissance corner.
I had dissected every text, by which I mean I incised
their skins then weighed their organs in my palms,
warm kidneys, spleens and lungs,
till each went cold and I realised I'd been removing
pieces of myself, a little at a time.

My throat closed and the sound wouldn't rise.
No one could get within a hundred miles.
I grasped my phone and all that fell from my lips
were the noises of a failed genetic experiment:
the grunts of a boar, an owl's screech
as it heard its own limits.

I lay curled in an armchair for weeks
staring at my hands, my skin so sheer
I split open at the lightest brush
of sound. I became a vessel of many silences:
the quiet of a locked room, braided
with the nearly-not-there of a tree;
a pause in a quarrel, tongue cropped
with one flick of a wrist.
I had to learn to talk again, practised
for hours shaping *J*, a narrow tunnel
of breath, just to say my name.

Now I can talk, in the basalt of my head
I sense sealed cracks that one day might reopen.
It makes me listen. I follow the quivering tongues
of tulips. The sky withholds its voice

and I linger. It is forming a syllable,
not the bellows of thunder but something else
trying and trying to begin, almost getting there
in this gathering of restless air.

Electric Blue

The radiance is visiting again,
a bloom of shimmering plankton at low tide
that lifts the brutal shore to space.

Conditions must be perfect for their blue glow,
the darkness total. They must be far from home,
completely lost, exiled by currents

then panicked by the foamy smack
of breakers. This is no bounty for them. It's horror,
this brilliance that quivers, arcs.

Picture it now so you'll remember the scene
one lonely midnight when your heart assaults
your ribs: the galactic light of tiny selves

that never wanted anything like this
but, together, finished up terrified, magnificent,
brightly living the only way they know.