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Poem by Stacey Balkun

Winner of the 2019 Talking Writing Prize for Poetry



Eulogy Ending in Red

The Possumtown neighborhood of Piscataway, New Jersey, was once home to both a former Union Carbide plant and the Middlesex Sampling Plant, a testing facility for the atomic bomb.

We burned through September, torched
oaks and maples refusing to give up
their brilliance. In the heat of late afternoon,

the factory blew its snowy dissonance through
our woods: chemical smell of popcorn and dryer sheets.

Eulogy Ending in Red

Published on Talking Writing (<https://talkingwriting.com>)

My best friend became Apple-Child, and I was a fistful of clover
until I got a splinter from her swing set
and she ran away screaming, terrified of AIDS

because by second grade, they'd taught us to fear
each other. I skipped church

to climb trees, a possum-girl, and none of us yet knew
about the radiation or the groundwater
or how the rectory was built

above contaminated fill. If we could leave it all
behind, simply step into a painting, we may not

choose Arcadia. We could be capable of anything
or maybe just fractured, cancerous, paranoid.
Well, if you have lost your mind, blame Union Carbide.

Blame the Atomic Bomb, Alan tells me,
it's not my fault. We were all baptized

in radioactive dirt. Given bread and told
to stay away from blood. As far as I know,
the river never caught fire. But

our throats itch, rough enough to strike a match.

Publishing Information

- "[Three-Acre Legacy of the A-Bomb: a Pile of Radioactive Dirt Awaits Cleanup in New Jersey \[5\]](#)" by Ronald Smothers, *New York Times*, October 27, 1998.

Art Information

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Stacey Balkun is the author of three poetry chapbooks and co-editor of *Fiolet & Wing: An Anthology of Domestic Fabulist Poetry*. Winner of the 2019 New South Writing Contest, her work has appeared in *Best New Poets 2018*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *The Rumpus*, and other anthologies and journals. Chapbook Series Editor for Sundress Publications, Stacey also teaches poetry online at The Poetry Barn and The Loft.

Of the genesis of her poem, she told TW by email:

I owe this poem to the Wurlitzer Foundation and Thomas Centolella of the Taos Poetry Retreat. Though this poem was drafted in a fifteen-minute writing prompt offered by Thomas, it is informed by months of research into the environmental history of the neighborhood in which I grew up. We played in those woods and swam in those polluted waters, but we were taught to fear abstractions. This poem is my reckoning with the natural world post-human influence as well as with my girlhood.

Visit her online at [Stacey Balkun's website](#) [6].

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[5] <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/27/nyregion/three-acre-legacy-bomb-pile-radioactive-dirt-awaits-cleanup-new-jersey.html>

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