

New Orleans Review

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In memory of
Julian Noa Wasserman
June 8, 1948—June 4, 2003
medievalist, mentor, and friend extraordinaire.



Sound in moral virtue was his speech,
And gladly would he learn and gladly teach.
—*The Canterbury Tales*

COVER ART:

Madonna/Like a Virgin

8 x 10 inches, oil on panel

Dona Lief, 2001.

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Still the Darkness

the fear of it, that is,
sniffing at places: the orphanage cellar and
bluestone basement, places never
as dead in the head as one imagines.

The stroke of a shadow in the drip
from a faucet, some gurgle repeating
downward eats and what will be
done to you, you, till you changes

to *du*, familiar of the primordial
where nose is put to light, and the detail is
the devil of matter.

Peonies

I

Ants chew open their bleed—
sweet light amid the planted
dead of Homewood Cemetery.

2

Stole them till ants filled
my bed, till those I brought back to
my studio started talking that
gibbous-moon talk of
the dead.

3

Whose bright
idea was it to mix them
in with those red-purple lilies that
make my throat close.

4

Pink, pink, pink, the tip
of a possum's nose, minus the folds of
course.

Anamnesis

Dragged the pond, drugged the leopard.
Dragged the wings, trashed
the silk. Silk, silk, mother of each.

Breached the sky, filled the mouth.

Swallowed the sound, choked her stars.
Swallowed lava, shot the bends.
Tore its hair, covered the scar. Wished

the fall, pitched the fear,

smacked the walls, leapt the well.
Filled the well, cramped the sight.
Searched the tar, followed the bight.

Dragged the lake. Seized the throat,

blossoming star, gulped the gas, flew
apart. Sliced the gut, pulled her out.
Laughed the longest, screwed the bead.

Parked the van, buried the crow,

bullied the ship, lit the skull. Curbed
the surf. Wiggled beneath to sniff
the brine. Pinched the song, pinched

the stem, pinched the nickel, rammed

the prow. Punched the tarp, trapped
its whine. Saw the burn silence the bugs.
Sliced the leaves. Left the knots,

leached the fields, scrubbed delight.

Tripped all traps, banished the tooth,
wrecked the ankles, punished his lines.
Rushed the vixens, tarried by turns,

blemished the wind, plinked the sign,

worried her silver to summon the box.
Wound the silk, scattered the rocks.
Dropped their bombs, lost the lilt,

ripped a cloud, swallowed its dregs.

Whirled the blades, blinded the moth,
nipped a pearl, grouted its chinks.
Scorched the pelts, slick or bound.

Once it was found, named the mine.

Then shouted the song to slake its mind.

*Plumed Wings, Apposing Thumbs
& Other Household Mutations*

—J.L.F. (1906-1999)

The same week you learn what riddles
her ovaries, your
results: *squamous*

metaplasia, cause/course: indeterminate. Most clearly

you share forks
in the path. Make-up of genes/rouge
for a sunken cheek.

A glass globe slips, clicks in half: stains a rinsed sky or

sink, snapped bolt
of gray silk. *Words*,
words. Stoic geraniums weathered over but

rusted black/back outside. Mind moves hurly-burly to

what's worst. Arms aloft: spiry
birch. Grebes preening
mites. As if just anybody hauls a Doc Marten

at your ribs. After that: whoosh of drapes down Soul's long hall.

Scales of fluorescent bark/sound
& light. A blue-green alga, spirier than
ever. Fission. Finds you

in a quick crouch. There's a hand-sized bunch of violets

beneath the firebush
you might have lost if you hadn't had to bend close
close. Answer: *nothing*

clear. But a gripping & soaring. But a beetle scaling the gauze.

Dear Eugene O'Neill

I saw your play last week, *A Moon For The Misbegotten*, starring Gabriel Byrne and Cherry Jones. I was very tired, as I haven't been sleeping well since my conception, and your play, Eugene, was very long. My father had told me it was worth staying awake for. He beseeched me to keep on my toes, to try not to drift, and stay with it. He said, "You're lucky to be exposed to him at such an early age. If I'd been sixteen when I first heard him, my life would have been different. Don't let the opportunity pass you by." My mother backed him up. We were standing in the kitchen of our brownstone on Horatio Street. She said, "It would do you well, all of us well, to listen to Eugene O'Neill. He's a very compassionate man, you know."

Later, waiting on the will-call line as my father smoked a cigarette outside, she told me, "Listen, Eugene O'Neill is your father's hero. It would mean a lot to him if you paid attention." So, for my father, and because my mother rarely asks anything of me, except that I refill a prescription for her now and then (she's not so hot in the depression department), or to keep quiet when she's on the phone with one of her real estate clients, I tried to stay alert. But toward the middle of the first act, my father had to nudge me in the ribs and gesture toward the stage. "Watch what he does here," he said. "Watch this. Wake up."

When I opened my eyes, the players looked blurry. A pop song was racing through my head, and I couldn't stop noticing a jasmine *eau de toilette* someone—I'm not naming any names—was wearing on my right. All this to say, I had a hard time getting into the swing of things. But by the end of your play—and it seems worth mentioning here that I'm not the religious type, in fact, the first time I

went to church was last year, Christmas Eve, with my mother in the midst of one her religious crises, and I was forced to run outside to stifle a fit of dry heaves—but by the end of your play, I was sure, beyond a shadow of a doubt...let's put it this way: red velvet seats never seemed so vibrant. Sleepy theater-goers, carrying playbills for keepsakes, never looked so alert. You should have seen this old lady in her black DKNY jacket with twelve rings on her fingers. Or a middle-aged man whose green shirt was spotted with the stains of tears. And my father. I could kiss you for the wide-eyed penetrating look that had settled on his face. Even my mother was up in spirits. She put her arm around me as we headed toward the exit.

Everyone was standing beneath the Terry Elms Theater marquee talking about Gabriel Byrne. Could Jason Robards have done a better job? What happened to his Irish accent? And what about that Cherry Jones? Or else commenting on how nice the sets were, how well your plays seem to be aging, how you handle the human condition so tactfully. They said they couldn't wait for another revival. But the peculiar thing, other than all their pupils being dilated, was that nobody was leaving. I haven't seen many Broadway plays, certainly none worth the fifty-some dollars they're asking these days (D'Artagnon's horse, during a production of *The Three Musketeers*, literally shit in the aisle), but I'm fairly certain it's common that when the show's over, when the ovations have been graciously or not-so-graciously received, the roses and daffodils tossed to the stage, people head home. Or out to get drunk. Or down to Sardi's for over-priced linguine.

But tonight, even if it had been a particularly cold March night (it was a warm March night), I do not think they would have left. Even my family, who are always the first to leave anything behind, stuck around until the marquee went dark, and the lobby lights were flicked off, and Cherry Jones got into her private car. Only when the crowd itself began to disperse did we head down the block to hail a cab.

We all stared out the windows, squeezed in next to each other, my father's clothes stinking of stale tobacco smoke. His hands rested delicately on his lap, a slight but perceptible grin on his face, the neon lights and blazing advertisements of Times Square reflecting on his eyeballs. All of it seemed like a wonderful fireworks display. If it weren't for the obscenely long line, coupled with the urge to get home and pull down my father's first edition of your play, I would have asked my parents if we could pull over at McDonald's and buy some fries and several Double Whoppers. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Usually just the sight of McDonald's gives me pause, makes me want to join the Peace Corps or move to Antarctica, but tonight, with her ominous 2.5 billion served, her specious golden wings frozen midflight, McDonald's looked like a safe haven for the tired and the hungry.

And downtown it was just the same. From the drug dealers in the meat market to the lovers walking quietly on tree-lined West Village side streets, everyone's brightest colors were out, all of them a part of some timeless luminous spectacle. We stopped at a red light on Gansevoort Street. My father sighed deeply, put his arm across my mother's shoulders, and then we were off again, the red numbers of the meter slowly rising.

It's my mother's responsibility, though it's a responsibility she often neglects, to feed the angelfish we keep in a small tank beside the living room fireplace. But that night she went over and sprinkled the orange flakes on the water's surface, tapped the tank with her wedding ring, and pressed her nose against the glass. My father headed into the kitchen to check the phone messages (there weren't any) and to boil some water. He came back a couple minutes later with three glasses of tea and joined my mother and me. We sat listening to the occasional car passing out front, and a dog barking somewhere near the park on Hudson Avenue; it was a deep short bark without much anger in it. We placed our bets as to what

kind of dog we thought it was. My father was certain it was a Black Labrador like Emperor Jones, the one we had when I was a child. He opened the front door and stared down the street, but could not find the dog. He shut the door and then stood there beside the coat tree looking at us.

My father usually retreats to his writing room around that time of night, eleven or so. He is, you see, a struggling playwright, and when I say struggling, I mean he's never gotten one of his plays produced, though every night, in his writing hat, a hat he swears gets his muse running home, he sits at his writing desk and starts banging away. That banging has a way of keeping me awake way past bedtime, and if I can actually fall asleep, rather than sneaking out and going for long walks down along the Hudson, when I wake for school, he's either still typing, or passed out, his typewriter for a pillow, the ashtray crammed full. And that's when things are going well. When things are going badly, our West Village apartment is frighteningly quiet. My father sits for days on end before a blank page, plates of uneaten food collect around his deep scowl, his hat seeming to deteriorate right there on his head.

But that night he did not go to his writing room. For the first time in longer than I can remember we just sat there, all of us together; the dog near the park eventually stopped barking and there was a long break in the traffic outside and everything was so quiet we could hear the soft hum of the water filter in the fish tank and the light wind whistling under the front door. When the tea was done, each of us went to bed, I'm quite sure effortlessly.

Thank you, Eugene. I could say thank you, and simply leave it there. I'm afraid, however, the state of affairs in this fair world, the state of affairs in the life of this young man, are a bit more complicated than that. The day after seeing your play, around noon, my family received news—my mother actually picked up the phone before it rang—that an old friend of my parents, from the days before they'd married, had shot herself in the head. My mother

claimed, having gotten a little tangled in the phone cord and trying to untie herself, that neither she nor her husband had spoken to the deceased for many years, and no, she was not planning on attending the funeral, even if it was going to be held at St Luke's church right here in the West Village.

My mother's posture went slack as she hung up the phone, the news having clearly ended the sweet spell your play had cast. And her depression, which we can usually brush off in part to tradition, began spreading through the house like a contagious flu. It was airborne. Since then, and it's been about a week, things in my house have been bad as ever. My mother, despite getting me to refill the more powerful of her prescriptions, has been cleaning the house over and over again—first the kitchen, then the bathrooms, bedrooms, living room, den, et cetera, and then back again. And my father, while listening to the vacuum cleaner, has been feeding exclusively on the gray-blue smoke of his Camel unfiltered, though his writing hat has not left the desk drawer for seventy-two hours and I have a sneaking suspicion he's sitting in the dark right now blindly tossing, or trying to toss, playing cards into a metal waste bin. I don't see how he's supposed to get back to work, what with the poisonous odor of Pine Sol overrunning his study and all.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to save something I fear is sinking irrevocably, I have been cutting school and hiding out in my bedroom, ploughing through your collected works—*Mourning Becomes Elektra*, by the way, was no Sunday stroll through the park. But despite your assistance and encouragement and guidance, some plainly dangerous views have been solidifying in my mind. It has been a struggle to keep from picturing my parents' old friend standing alone on a rooftop, or sitting in a dark room with a pistol on her lap.

What I'm coming to is this, Eugene: I've read all your plays—this evening I finished *More Stately Mansions*—and I dare say I love

you. But I have a favor to ask. There seems to be a lack of teachers and leadership and... well, I do not ask this favor lightly, and I do not think I ask it solely for myself. Nor would I ask it of anyone less: Write us another play, won't you? What sort of an excuse is death?

Incarnadine

It is the hue of the hematic flush
brought to the cheek by fever or anger

and to the neck, breast, and genitals
by the artless involutions of desire,

in nature most analogous to the damask-
petaled rose, and in life to the ardent

face of the young woman who receives it,
the hue of artists and of the surgical

theater, of birth and death, alarm
and deficit, of plumage, pomp, display,

a complex aggregate of pigments—
blue, black, rouge, earthen or chemical—

designed to imprint in us its image
so as to resurrect whole our first blood

and our mothers in their tender empathy
still decades away from diminishment,

the hue of the cleric and of the harlot,
of banners, zealots, fray, of the limitless

carnage of war and attrition, of valor,
pacts, and the pyres of a hundred nations,

and tonight, the hue of the rising moon
and of the cardinal in the hawk eating berries,

the hue of the berries, and of the heedless
muscle whose hunger impels us all.

Triolet Quintet

I

How else to love the world but to rise
each morning from the bed of your making

into the addle and dross the hours devise.
How else to love the world but to rise

as though order is the ardor that drives
this life between waking and waking.

How else to love the world but to rise
each morning from the bed of your making.

II

What comfits of nipples, of fists
and toes, your mouth accords you,

flesh your flesh cannot resist.
What comfits of nipples, of fists

and toes, this carnal life insists
we covet and give tongue to.

What comfits of nipples, of fists
and toes, your mouth accords you.

III

Love has made you eloquent,
your tongues laps of rapturous wit

that praise sweet abandonment.
Love has made you eloquent

and dumb, its intent the silent
tongue two tongues transmit.

Love has made you eloquent,
your tongues laps of rapturous wit.

IV

Lust, little despot of the flesh,
morning and evening you incite us

to rollick in your goatish congress.
Lust, little despot of the flesh,

you breach even the opiate press
of sleep, your daft accomplice.

Lust, little despot of the flesh,
morning and evening you incite us.

Though you say you will never wed
again, Father, never say never

to the bonds of the marital bed.
Though you say you will never wed,

what but love has been your bread
and meat, your lifelong fever?

Though you say you will never wed
again, Father, never say never.

Draining

During that simmering pre-dinner lull when the sun is at its heaviest, the man walked the perimeter of the lake. Whether or not he walked the entire 4.1 miles, there was no telling; but every evening, without fail, the husband and wife passed him, usually between the footbridge and the BEWARE: ALLIGATORS sign, in the opposite direction as they circled the lake on their own daily jogs. He was a tall man, thin and copper skinned; he carried a shiny dark brown walking stick with a metal tip that clicked along the pavement, and he wore what looked, to the husband and wife, a lot like safari fatigues—sometimes beige, sometimes olive green, always long-sleeved and crisply laundered. A safari hat, too, like a wide-rimmed bowl. Every evening he smiled at them, as if he wasn't sure exactly what they were up to, but whatever it was, he approved. They grew to like him.

And so they worried about him. They had no idea how old he was. Forty-five? Fifty-five? Sixty? Older than sixty? He had an ageless swagger in his step, and they couldn't see his hair beneath the hat. The uniform led them to suspect he held some sort of government job, for the road crew or parks department (maybe he worked at Greenfield Park, right across the lake, and took his walks after his shift?), but they couldn't know for sure. They didn't *want* to know for sure. Once they were out of earshot, they talked about him. The wife wondered aloud how the man could tolerate the heat while wearing all those clothes—all those heavy, dark clothes. "Look at *me*," she said, and, without breaking stride, held her arms out to indicate her spandex shorts and sports bra. "And *still* I'm dripping like crazy."

The husband looked at her.

"I mean, if he works for someone—whatever—you'd think they could at least give him short sleeves to wear."

"Maybe the long sleeves block out the sun. I've heard that."

"Yeah, but...come on." She looked up into the trees, as if the heat were visible there.

"Maybe it's a special fabric. Breathable. Something like that."

They decided that this was the most reasonable justification. It didn't exactly make sense, but the potential for some semblance of logic seemed to be there. And, now that she thought about it, didn't Humphrey Bogart wear long sleeves all through *Key Largo*?

The lake was green, unmoving, layered with moss and flecks of yellow pollen out of which turtles poked their heads. They liked to describe it to their friends up north as amoeba shaped.

Over time the husband and wife formed an ambiguous but sincere relationship with the man based on the evolution of the man's greeting, which began as merely cordial, an automatic nod, and progressed through a series of eyebrow flicks and squinty close-lipped grins that seemed to convey a distinct intimacy. They geared up for the exchange as they approached him, and could tell he was doing the same.

Sometimes the wife would say "Hi-ya!" as they bounced past, and packed into those two syllables was an entire history between them, and a future, and oblique insinuations the magnitude of which bubbled just beneath the surface of their comprehension. On one occasion they laughed together when she and the man played a clumsy game of misdirection—each trying to get out of the other's way on the narrow footpath. She reached out and touched his forearm.

"It's heavy," she said of his shirt's fabric. "But not *hot*." They glided around a bend in the path, away from the street and into a quiet area heavy with foliage—beefy magnolias and blooming azalea and drooping kudzu, the soft trickling of a nearby creek. Ducks

as tame as puppies wandered the grounds in search of kind souls with bags of bread crusts. "It was almost, kind of, cool."

"Maybe he knows something we don't."

This was before the weather turned, before the baby came.

And before the water, with no warning, was drained from the lake. They'd gone away for the holidays and come back on New Year's. They'd spent New Year's Eve at an EconoLodge in Fredericksburg, Virginia, the halfway point of their trip, and when they rounded a curve in Lake Shore Drive, weary from travel, they were experiencing the hazy sensation of finally being home, and away from home. It was mid-day.

They noticed it together, as a break in the leafless trees opened the sightlines up a bit: the lake was empty. Not dry, not gone, just empty. Barren. A dark bubbly muck, not yet frozen but shivering tenuously against the weak sunlight, lined the bottom. A handful of osprey waded in puddles, the surfaces of which reflected back at them like mirrors. Mosquitoes hovered in thick clouds. What particularly struck them, though, was the lake's depth, or lack thereof, which could not have been more than four or five feet. The husband slowed the car. They gawked, tried to blink it all back to normal. She lowered her window. A dense, biting smell, like the Earth's own excrement, poured inside.

"Oh... God," she said.

They wondered aloud if the lake had not only been drained but filled back *in* as well. They kicked around various scenarios: an ecological precaution of some sort perhaps; an issue regarding the depth of the Cape Fear River, into which the lake, via a series of labyrinthine creeks and pipelines, eventually fed; a budget cutback; simple human error. None of these possibilities made any sense, but neither did... *this*. The husband pulled over to the side of the road, flicked on the hazards.

"But, there's nothing to it," she said, her voice a mix of disbelief, indignation, and sheer disappointment.

"No."

"Alligators can't live in that—even when there is water in it. Neither can fish. Nothing..." She squinted. "Where are the fish? There aren't even any dead ones. There's nothing there. Look! People fish from that bridge. What did they think they were going to catch?" She turned to him. "It's all just a big scam, isn't it?"

"Evidently."

Nevertheless, later that afternoon they pulled on their sweats and laced up their shoes and went for a jog. The light had turned silvery, opaque; a chill rose from the ground.

She couldn't get loose and had to stop and walk after just a half-mile. There was a marked frustration in her panting. She put her hands on her hips and sucked air through her teeth. They were the only ones on the trail.

"What if this is it?" she said.

"If this is what?"

"It."

The husband shrugged. "Well, I guess I can live with that."

"We've got to do something," she said. "About...you know, where we're going."

"Uh-huh, here it comes."

"No. No way. Don't do that to me. I'm serious. I just don't want to move again. I'm sick of moving."

"I understand. I am, too. Now could you do me a favor? Could you just stretch whatever it is you have to stretch and let's get on with this."

But she didn't move, except for the rising and falling of her shoulders with each breath. She stared at the ground, her head slightly cocked, as if trying to recall the capital of Missouri. A breeze kicked up, lifting stray leaves and tossing them in rising corkscrews, and a high-pitched whine—wind against aluminum siding from an adjacent condo complex—wailed down Lake Shore. When it subsided they heard a strange rapid clicking overlapped by a steady

hum and when they looked up they saw the safari-clad man break through the thick overhang and into the silvery evening light, coming toward them on a bicycle. The bicycle was too small for him, a girl's bike, with a metal basket in front and multi-colored streamers flapping from the handlebars about his wrists; his walking stick was wedged in the bike's frame, between the handlebars and the seat. He pedaled furiously, knees pumping almost into his armpits. The outfit was khaki and the expression on his face was easy, relaxed, perhaps even secretly amused. When he recognized them he smiled.

"I'm gonna ask him," she said.

"No. Don't."

"But he'll know," she said. "This is stuff we've got to learn. We can't go on like this."

"We'll learn. Just wait."

"You don't even know what..."

"Yes," said the husband. "I do."

She turned back to the man approaching on the bike. The man rang the bell—*ding-ding, ding-ding*—and kept pumping his legs. He looked, suddenly, psychotic.

As he came up alongside them, the man took one hand from the handlebar to give a quick wave. The bike shuddered, its front wheel jerking back and forth. One foot slipped from its pedal and the man made a lunging motion trying to steady the bike. His eyes were wide and his teeth showed in a frightened smile.

They reached for him but before they could get a grip his foot somehow found the pedal. He leaned forward, his chest to the handlebars, and again began his labored pumping.

"Hey," she said as he slid past. "Hey, where'd you get that bike?"

It wasn't what she'd planned to say but once it was out she saw immediately that she'd spooked him. The man pressed down into the pedals, nearly standing, putting all his weight into regaining his

speed. He glanced over his shoulder at the wife and then quickly turned away.

"Hey!" she said. "Hey, come back here!"

Before she knew it she was running after him. She heard the husband calling her name but she kept going. The tightness in her calves melted away and she felt as if she were gliding, weightless, propelled by something outside of herself, as if she could run as fast as she wanted to run, it was all up to her, and in fact it surprised her to realize she'd run too fast. She'd have liked to feel herself sustain the sprint longer, carry it farther, faster even, slam it into the next gear, to hold onto that sensation of pure speed for just a few moments more, but all at once she was at the man's shoulder and she had to pull back to stay even with him.

"Come on now," the wife blurted, and tried to laugh but the quick intake of cold air choked her and it came out sounding like a growl. The man pedaled harder. His safari hat had slipped down, partially covering his eyes. She reached out and took hold of his sleeve, near his bicep, more to steady herself than anything—she was afraid of getting her foot run over or tangled in the spokes—and the bike wobbled again. She held on, trying to stabilize things. She knew this man was frightened of her—she'd apparently crossed some unspoken line of decorum between them and didn't know how to get back—but she wanted some answers about the lake, about its paltry depth and missing water, answers she was now convinced that he had. Why else would he be trying to avoid her?

"God, just let me *ask* you!" she said.

The man shrugged out of her grip and located some deep reserve of strength and a split-second later he pulled several yards ahead of her as the walking stick slipped from the bike and clattered along the pavement. The wife slowed and then stopped, watched the man put more and more distance between them. Then she bent over, wheezing, her calves and hamstrings immediately tightening to

clenched fists. Her collarbones ached. She rested her elbows on her knees and stared through teary eyes down at the walking stick. It was lacquered and shiny—clearly expensive—with a gold tip at one end and a gold elephant head at the other.

By now it was nearly dark. The husband's footslaps rang out on the pavement behind her, getting louder, closer. She was about to straighten, to turn and face the husband's flustered, puzzled interrogation, when a duck—brown and alone and surely lost, or else in complete denial concerning the sudden absence of its home—waddled into her field of vision. It bent over, as if imitating her, and pecked at the walking stick, then looked up at her expectantly.

"Can't help you, little man. It's all over," the wife said. "Now, shoo."

But the duck stayed. It padded around in two or three tight circles, then extended its wings partway, and quacked. On an impulse, she reached out to touch its head, and it let her. *You're kidding*, the wife thought. *You've got to be kidding me*, as she, carefully, with her knuckles, smoothed back the cool brown feathers.

Renoir's Daddy

—Filmmaker Jean Renoir was the son of painter Pierre Auguste Renoir.

Le Moulin de la Galette was trembling
With wavelets of dappled light that wouldn't
Be still Jean barely looked another
Framed and menaced "companion" the nudes
As daily as doorknobs but smuggled away
At night by collectors with scented beards
Renoir's daddy was Renoir

In the paradise for which the real
World posed young Jean was almost a girl
With a specimen of golden long hair
That father refused to do without
Father slyly noble about
The whims and fidgets of boys who posed
Renoir's daddy was Renoir

What to do for this sloppy son
To fence him in from the lies of those
Who earn money with words and won't labor
With dirty hands build a pottery
Little shed with a fixed wheel
To spin Jean's destiny from clay
Renoir's daddy was Renoir

Jean labored but loved nothing better
Than drifting downriver in rowboats the leaves

Kissing his cheek with dappled light
How's that for a trade he drifted into
Marriage with his father's model
And the idyll of making films with her
Renoir's daddy was Renoir

Daddy died and Jean was selling
Paintings to buy the watery
Celluloid on which he could drift
In *La Chienne* it's not only
The prostitute who betrays and is killed
While the killer's self-portrait is driven away
Renoir's daddy was Renoir

Jean lives surrounded by vacant frames
The killer lives to become a bum
In *Boudu Saved from Drowning* he's fished
From his suicide by a good bourgeois
Then beds the man's wife marries his mistress
Capsizes them all escapes and flicks
His hat in the river black waterlily
Renoir's daddy was Renoir

Sigmund Freud's Study

—a box reproducing in miniature Freud's study in Vienna in March 1938,
a few days before he went into exile, created by Charles Matton.

The box says, yes, you can always enter
The life of the master just as you played
Once with dolls or soldiers and poured
Your overflowing life into theirs.

It is all seduction and witness, the big
Little window giving on darkness,
Branches seeming to plead for admission
As doors that were trees are parting to open.

Forever is just a gamble on size:
Think smaller and the master might really
Never have left for England and
Death—it is now and nearly spring.

Colleagues worry. The newspaper dropped
By the desk is open like an astonished
Face to news of the Anschluss. But history
Waits for him to enter his study.

And you like an early patient wait...
Whatever is wrong, whatever murderous
Urges are broadcast now like pollen,
Your wandering, curious gaze dispels:

News rests on the carpet, itself a printout
On cloth hand-frayed. Look, tiny spines
Of books, epoxy mixed with copper
Or brass powder, and demi-finger-

Size ancient sculptures pausing like breathless
Bystanders at an accident.
The almost sentient chair that is twice
Designed and now a miniature

Of leather, wood, and plaster receives
The space where the master's thinking body
Is not but might be. And so it is brimming,
The empty room poised to be emptier.

The box says, yes, you can always enter,
But a small voice niggles, resist this room,
Its promises, and a billion seeds
Germinate worlds for the onset of spring.

The Magician's Assistant

From inside the locked wooden box
the magician had made for her, she watched
the jugglers swing the world, the tightrope walkers

weave their strings into the air, the bears
grow dizzy beneath a solar system of plastic red balls.

Knives moved at her. The circus
of her life ran circles inside her head.
The sky shifted in smoke and mirrors.

She could see the faces of the audience
reflected off her sequins, the little boys

and balloons going up in orange lights around her,
the bored mothers and crying infants
wheeling under a low canvas heaven.

Then she saw woke up beside her
and the magician flew down from his tall hat

and her arms came apart in their boxes.
She stared at her feet, far below her
and pointing in the opposite direction.

And she stared at the magician, waving
his wand over the distant mountains of Europe.

And she stared at the blue city where her legs had been
until she could weigh down everything
with separate rocks of understanding.

Cracks in the Ceiling

When the light finally reached us
from Cassiopeia's fallen crown and
the last broken year of Arcturus,
we read the glowing alphabets as they fell

and looked up at the permanent sky kingdom
and through the holes
that had burned right through it.
As star embers collapsed in gold sentences

and algebras of distance and time
smoked in the second atmosphere,
we turned the pages of debris and pieced
together Andromeda's scattered chains.

This was no movement of ether or accident,
no simple collision of moon satellites
or meteor shoes thrown
from the rough gallop of Pegasus;

instead the stars had blown through
their hand-drawn pictures, slipped loose
from the repeating bears and queens and chariots
and spun into new galaxies

with different colors and measures
for judging time. The holes we saw
were not footprints or doorways or cigarettes,
but a way of falling down.

So we picked up the light in ashes,
in wheels and jewelry and spent arrows,
reconfiguring the ground as the sky
in the burnt filaments of a million gone stars.

As we worked—rebuilding the convent of the Pleiades,
Orion's bolted armor, the perfect north of Polaris,
installing every star with its own paradise
and its personal choir of angels—

we looked sideways at the sky and its holes and
the fallen years of light at our feet
and saw through the cracked system of swords and governments
to a new heaven: perfect, repeating glass.

Three's A Crowd

Right now my wife, Helen, and I are in The Pilot House restaurant here in Cape May, having just biked the twenty blocks from the old Victorian rental she inherited nearly ten years ago. We're at a table near the fireplace on this gray March evening, the logs already melting into large orange coals. Helen's cheeks are red from the ride down and mine feel the same way, too. Just after we order—flounder for her and stuffed shrimp for me—and two white wines come, she quietly says, as if it's been a part of a very long conversation, "Teddy called Wednesday." Since Teddy was, eleven years ago, the only other man to ask Helen to marry him, quite reasonably I take a moment before I say, as flat as I can, "Oh, really?"

"He's in New York and, well..." she says, then turns her right hand palm up.

"Really?" I manage again. Then, in the same tone, I say, pretty much without thinking, "What's he up to?" Helen's eyes have already shifted to the fireplace and the coals that seem as if they will shimmer endlessly. As though I should know all about the film business, she says, "...from L.A. for some establishing shots. For a tv film he's directing," she adds.

"Oh?" I say. Then she asks if I know that most of the tv stuff set in New York is actually shot in L.A. "He's married now?" I try, and Helen shakes her head slowly, then smiles as she says he's got a house with a heart-shaped pool and two dalmatians.

"His third film," she adds.

"I see."

"He's been all over," she goes on. Briefly, she looks my way and then back to the fire. She ticks off Mexico, "southern France several times," Thailand and, she finishes, "even, he said, a stint in the sub-Sahara."

"Very glamorous," I say as our house salads arrive. If she hears my tone it makes no impression.

She picks up her fork and sends the tines straight into the middle of a plump cherry tomato, twists it to get a good coating of balsamic on it, then eats it. "Life with Teddy would have been different," I say.

What of course I want is for her to say something reassuring, that she sure is glad after all's said and done that she married me. Instead, she says, "I know."

As she goes after the other cherry tomato, I ask, "And what does one talk about to an old love?" She smiles a little, but does not look at me. Slowly, she chews the tomato, obviously pleased with its taste. "Mostly," she finally says, "the boys. He wanted to know all about them." The reference is to our two young sons staying with a sitter for the weekend at home up in Metuchen.

"For my money, he's just checking up on your marriage," I tell her.

"Yes, I suppose he is," she says. Now she spears a large ring of red onion and, after a bit of maneuvering, gets it into her mouth. The taste of this pleases her, too. Then she looks directly at me for a long time, her eyes all over my face and shoulders, as if in a very frank appraisal.

"Did you tell him you had a good marriage?" I ask.

"It never came up," she answers.

Just then dinner comes and we eat our first few bites silently, each glancing in turn at the fire, its heat still as strong as when we came in. Outside, it's started to rain, Decatur Street slick and black under the streetlights. In a way that seems as if it comes at the end of a daydream, Helen asks what I think the rest of our lives will be like. With a small smile I shake my head and say I don't know, we're only in our thirties. Then I hear that what she's just asked has a quiet echo of meaning, a certain lost quality. I glance up and see

that her eyes are on the fire, in them the kind of thin water that comes with melancholy. I think then that my teaching ten-through-twelve English and her part-time library work are pretty dull stuff. "What would you like it to be?" I ask.

"If I knew I'd say," she answers.

Then I'm much too quick to say that everyone's in a rut—at least everyone we know—because it's not out of my mouth for an instant before she says, "Janet Willoughby isn't." Her reference is to the wife of Father Gill, one of the Episcopal priests in our parish: thirty-four with three kids, and she upped and left it all to go back to Oklahoma to live with her high school sweetheart.

Turned out that they'd begun writing while he was doing four years for a D.U.I. homicide. It's been all over the parish for months. "The whole thing just boggles..." I say. Then, again, she's looking away at the fire.

"Do you think Janet's happy?" she asks.

I shrug and say, "Who knows?"

She says that, if I really want the truth, she's sick and tired of the nasty little people in the parish condemning Janet. "Maybe," she says, "she did something brave."

"She hurt four innocent people," I answer.

"Was she supposed to be dishonest, live her life for everyone else?"

"Put that way," I say, "no. It's just that the whole thing seems tragic."

"It is," she says, "but that doesn't make her wrong." Then, as if she's given much more thought to the situation than just this conversation, she says, "She chose between a moral obligation to herself and her family responsibilities."

"Exactly."

"Few women make her kind of decision," she says. Then she reaches for the dessert menus standing on their sides between the salt and pepper shakers.

Outside, the rain has eased into a light drizzle, and when I ask if she wants to take the long way home along Beach Avenue and the boardwalk her answer is to point her bike that way and give a strong shove with one foot. Briefly, I watch her glide away through the cone of a street light and then into the darkness.

When I catch up to her at the end of the block she's at the red light in the middle of the empty street, her arms folded, a light glaze from the drizzle on her face, eyes fixed on the ocean just beyond the boardwalk. "I wish I could tell you," she says, "that I didn't like his calling."

The light changes to green and we push off to the other side of Beach Avenue and nose our bikes into the long empty rack. In the summer there are four or five of these, always full. I take my lock and loop it through both front wheels and, with a solid click, close the padlock. Then we go up the ramp and onto the boardwalk. The shops and arcades are closed and, in most cases, gated. We lean on the railing and look down at the waves as they slide around the pilings and then bump against the boulders just below us. Far out there is a single white light near the horizon, either from a dead-slow freighter or, perhaps, a single star through a small break in the clouds.

"Do you still have feelings for him?" I ask.

"It was pretty intense back then," she says. Then I tell her that the last night she saw him when she turned him down—the night I kept calling and calling—I nearly drank myself out of my mind. She tells me she didn't know that, that when she finally called around midnight all my roommate said was that I'd gone to bed. "On the floor," I tell her.

"I did think you were awfully calm about it all," she says.

"Just flat missed the bed."

She raises her head and looks out toward the ocean, the sky and water so black that they are inseparable. "What I remember most,"

she says—really, it sounds as if it's to herself—"was how he loved to dance." For the moment, I'm not even there. "I did love him," she says. She turns toward me but does not look at me.

Just as we come in the front door, and even before Helen turns on the hall light, we both smell it: Major, the McCarthy's cat from next door, has—for the third time in the last year—gotten into our house through the broken ground-level window in the basement, and taken, pun intended, a major dump right in the middle of the living room floor. I hit the light and, together, we stare at it. Helen asks why that little bastard would do such a thing, and I tell her I haven't the faintest idea. Together, with lots of paper towels, the rubber gloves and a dustpan from the basement, and the big jug of Fantastik, we start to clean it up. Helen is not happy that the sloppy duct-tape-and-cardboard repair job I did last fall has clearly failed, and she makes me promise that before we leave Sunday that window will finally be fixed.

A while later I'm in the kitchen tying up the ends of the garbage bag when the phone rings in the hallway and Helen answers it. I go still for a moment thinking that it's the boys calling before bedtime, or, more probably, the sitter with the day's news about them. It's Teddy. I know this from how Helen says, surprised, "Oh, how are you?" While I listen I place the yellow plastic tie around the neck of the bag and pull it as tight as I can. Pleasantries out of the way, Teddy gets down to business.

I become aware that I'm like a large awkward statue caught in the process of trying to stand up—and so, slowly, I do, and it's then I realize the extent to which my heart's racing.

Then the picture of Helen and Teddy—the only time I ever met him—comes into my mind: the two of them walking across the Columbia campus, he with an arm around her shoulders, she glancing up at him adoringly, he, yes, in a varsity letter sweater with a big

"C" on his chest. They stopped by my bench where I was trying to read *Ulysses* for the third time. Helen and I had been out a few times—coffee, a Japanese film I couldn't understand at all, and a stuffy department tea. Teddy's handshake was apeline, his smile a toothpaste ad, his demeanor forceful and, as I confessed to her later, wholly intimidating.

"Oh, yes," he managed from behind his huge, perfect teeth, "Helen did mention you." He was, frankly, the kind of guy you'd like to punch in the nose, but, at the same time, you knew that if you did you'd get the worst of it. Right then, his arm still around Helen's shoulders, he gave a little squeeze and pulled her into him, looked down at her, and said, "The high school teacher, right?"

"Teddy's going to make movies," Helen said, trying to lighten the moment. She tried, or, at least I think I saw her try, to move away from him a little. Then, with a disdain I'd never experienced, he looked me over and asked what fraternity I'd been in. I gave him the two-fold answer that I'd been in none and had gone to Rutgers.

Suddenly, Helen's standing in the kitchen doorway, eyes red, arms crossed. She more or less slumps against the door jamb, then says that the call was from Teddy and, if it were all right with everybody, he'd like to come down tomorrow. My reaction is to tell her that I'm not so sure it is, and why does he want to see you after all these years? "You're married with two kids," I say. Helen, her expression calm, as if she expected exactly what I said and was only waiting to get it out of the way, answers,

"Teddy's dying."

Over the next several minutes Helen tells me that Teddy's not filming anything, he's been at New York Hospital for the last two weeks and that what he's got in the right side of his brain is, "well, he said, unpleasant."

"And he wants to come here?" I say, my tone as though I'm trying to verify something I can't quite believe. "Tomorrow?"

We look at each other for a long moment, then I break it off, pick up the garbage bag, and start out the door. When she says, "Seeing him is something I have to do."

I answer, "Okay, okay."

When Teddy arrives Saturday afternoon just before one, it's with quite a flare: BMW convertible, top down, somewhat defiantly, I think, since it's only in the high fifties with hard low clouds out over the ocean. I see the car go right by the house, Teddy looking first left then right, then left again, checking numbers, and when he does a hard u-turn half a block down and comes slowly back I get a good look at him. Astonishingly, he appears no different at all than when I last saw him—except for the letter sweater—replaced now by a dark green windbreaker, the kind of guy, I let myself think, who's always going to look young. As he gets out and looks up at the house I have the thought that there's nothing wrong with him at all, the whole thing's a ruse. But just as I call to Helen back in the kitchen that he's here I see him reach into the small space behind the bucket seats and lift out a cane. His left side unsteady, he comes around the front of the car and, with some additional effort, over the curb.

Helen takes only a brief look over my shoulder through the living room window before she goes straight out the front door and quickly down the steps. I'm not surprised that they embrace, but I don't much like it when it seems to me to go on for too long, Teddy's cane off the ground, both arms around Helen. By the time I get through the front door and to the top of our steps they've broken it off, but Helen is still holding onto his right arm as they start toward me. "Hey, there, Jack," Teddy says almost musically, now more weight on the cane than I'd seen. I say hi back and that I'm glad you could come, but as they start up the stairs neither seems to hear me. I open the screen door as wide as I can and they go in.

Helen steers him into the smaller living room to the right where he sits in the middle of the two vinyl-covered cushions on the wicker couch.

For a few minutes he's full of questions about the house: what the summer rates are, taxes, upkeep, commissions. Helen answers him with general numbers, as if the two of them are negotiating something I'm not a part of, don't really even understand, and then Helen changes the subject and asks him if he'd like some lunch. He says yes, he sure would, just no red meat, please. Helen leaves without looking back at either of us, and then Teddy turns to me—I'm standing with my arms folded by the wide door—and says, "Know what this house will be worth in twenty, thirty years?" He answers his own question with, "A lot." Then, finally, our eyes really meet and he says, "She looks absolutely terrific."

During lunch, Helen and Teddy make plans: he wants us all to zip up to Bally's in Atlantic City for some slots and roulette, then dinner on him. Helen, with a long glance at me, says fine, but first she'd like to drive him around town, out to the Point, show him the marina. I read in Helen's eyes that what I say and do now is important to her. After a long moment I say that you two ought to go it alone, after all three's a crowd, and I've got a basement window to fix before we leave tomorrow. Clearly, from how the mood lightens and conversation picks up—and Teddy tells a couple of very good Hollywood jokes—it was the right thing to say.

As I'm cleaning up in the kitchen while Helen's upstairs getting ready, I suddenly become aware of Teddy standing in the doorway leaning on his cane. "I'm not going to get mushy about it," he says, "but thanks." For this I really have no words. Holding the bowl of chicken salad, I look at him, then nod, as if this will tell him I understand. Then, with his huge smile, he turns and starts to walk down the hall. Even with his cane each step seems more precarious than

the one before, and halfway to the front door he puts out his right arm to steady himself against the wall.

A few minutes later I'm standing by the kitchen doorway when Helen comes down and the two of them start toward the front door without so much as a goodbye in my direction. I say I hope you have a good time and she looks back at me, blows a kiss, and says, "There's ground beef in the fridge," and then is out the door. I stand absolutely still for several minutes until I hear the car start up and, finally, drive off. Amazingly, then, in the doorway that leads from the kitchen down to the basement, Major appears. He doesn't see me right away, his head in a cunning little swivel, and I wait until he comes out into the middle of the room before I say, "I'd like to wring your little neck." So fast does he sprint back down the stairs and across the basement floor, that even going after him as quickly as I can, I catch only a flash of his tail as he bolts through the window.

Normally, fixing something around here like a six-by-eight broken window would take perhaps an hour, not including the trip to Swain's for the materials. But this afternoon, for reasons I'm totally aware of, I make a mess of it from the start. Taking out what's left of the old glass, I cut my thumb twice—not badly, but enough to make it sting and bleed; I mis-measure the opening for the glass so that I have to go back to Swain's and have them re-cut, and while I'm there the first time I forget the box of glazing points. In all, it takes close to three hours to finally replace the window, and when I'm done the idea of ground beef in the fridge—knowing Helen and Teddy are probably eating lobster and filet—doesn't sit too well with me and I decide to bike down to the Ugly Mug for a beer and a club sandwich.

When I come home an hour and a half later, only a tiny bit of orange left in the sky, I'm startled to see that Teddy's car is back and the downstairs lights, especially those in the small living room to

the right, shine warm and yellow through the window. But it's not until I start up the front steps that I hear the music, slow and moody, something that sounds like an arrangement of an old Sinatra song. Instead of going in the front door I walk over to the living room window and look in.

The first thing I notice is Teddy's cane lying on the couch. Then I see Helen and Teddy are dancing, not intimately, not even close, but from the expressions on their faces it's certain that this, for them, is a special, even wonderful moment. I watch only for another few seconds and then walk away down the stairs and head toward Philadelphia Beach two blocks away.

When I come back an hour later Teddy's gone. I go in to see that Helen's reading on the wicker couch, shoes off, a cup of tea to her left. I stand in the doorway looking at her until her eyes come up to mine. Because I say nothing about having seen the two of them, nor will I ever, she is rightfully bewildered when the first thing I say is, "I love you more than I ever have."

Early Snow

The coming across and coming across in waves,
 where a pine leans like a ship beyond rescue in fog,
 and the lawn's a sudden dune but without the staves
 of fence and seasharp air. Keeping a log,

an iron cauldron with its scare of umber stalks
 scribbles cryptic comments like a Latin seer
 as a jet's sound erupts in fits and starts
 and even now, the melt begins to appear:

distended liquid stars—in which is distilled
 the essence of clear-eyed departure—drip from the gutters,
 like the body pretending to be an eternal clock

though in secret places now, starting to utter
 its long haywire descent, tick by tick,
 as flesh-colored leaves surrender on the sill.

Ophelia

The pale green larks can never be reconciled
 In the lavender nesting of her hair, and she
 Can never tolerate the absurd events inside

Her brain: what the malignant gods have let her become.

So now the river's petrified, golden stones float by;
 Darkness coagulates on the edge of her dream;
 Visceral ribbons tangle with the filigree

Of wet, decaying twigs. She stares at us defiantly.

And motionless as a finished effigy,
 She begins to dance in solitude downstream.

★

Without any flowers
 you are still breathing
 —without a throat

still eating the warm air
 though what's left from the sun
 is no longer blue

hides the way your grave
 is covered with stones
 and still hungry

—you could use more stones
 a heaviness to become your arms
 one for working harder

the other invisible
 leaving your heart
 lifts from the dirt

your mouth, your eyes
 and the sky letting go the Earth
 as if you weigh too much.

★

It has nothing to do with flames
 but since your shadow comes from the sun
 it starts out as silence

already knows in the few hours left
 another evening will flow
 and once inside your bones

even more restlessness
 —the sun will never be content
 till it ripens you into someone else

bewitched the way your shadow
 breaks with the past, is absorbed
 and once in the ground, nourished

safe from predators and over time
 even this moon will become a sun
 ignited half by sunlight

half at your side while the night
 in its sudden joy becomes a morning
 you never heard before.

Perhaps

Someone in the photo who looks like me
climbs a spring-wet trail to Alta Peak,
wild columbine—five colors
against the sky. I was never there.

I never swam with Carl at Heather Lake.
Nor was I in Florence—the Ponte Vecchio
in that picture through a rainy mist.

Perhaps I hold memories until
what happened never happened at all—
maybe time abolishes time.

I think of East L.A., thirty years ago—
the TV is on and Dad falls asleep in front
of company. That's where I never was,
so often now.

But those photographs! Two boys
bobbing in some mountain lake—sun
in their eyes, the moment drifting
like cloud shadows over the water.

Love Poem for my Being Here at All

When I'm gone, evening still will fall,
the crickets come again
to find this falling porch of stains.
The washstand, propped against a post,
will catch and then release the wind.

Not possible, I know, but still
I've wished to be here
when my absence is the light
walking in and out of sage grass,
nothing there to stall its inarticulation.

But I know better. I know this afternoon
is almost done, and soon I'll rise and go inside
to talk and news and wrung-out dishrags,
the unswept floor I'll sweep and mop
as if this time, for once, the shine can stay.

We'll Have a Pudding in Half an Hour

Tom, he was a piper's son, He learnt to play when he was young, And all the tune that he could play, was Over the Hills and Far Away. Repeat the lyrics with me, teacher said, until my pulse becomes known to you. Paint that lasts a thousand years of rain. A house that appears from nowhere. We can play Marching on black keys, we can play Marching on white keys. Fiona is my friend. Fiona owns a sax. This is my school. This is my town. This is my state. This is my country. I am not a grasshopper, I am not a rabbit, I am not a fox, I am Peter, the largest, the smallest of them all. The melody in the song moves up like the sun in the morning, in the end leaving me round and sound. I can swing in a hammock, I can stretch myself, I can go bong, bang, bing. Hear them ring, one kind of bell, all available bells. Fiona's mother is an invalid. She likes to spin around in circles. She would stand on her head if she could. Fiona's star is lucky. She is stronger than her mother. So her tiny toes tap, she strikes the cymbals, she claps the cymbals, she plays the sax. She talks to me about the picture the song brings to mind. There was a man lived in the moon, And his name was Aiken Drum, And he played upon a ladle, And his name was Aiken Drum. This makes me think of going to the supermarket. It makes Fiona think of the sounds of an aquarium, bubbles floating on air, water swishing softly like air, fish coming to the top. What are little girls made of, made of? What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice and all things nice, And such are little girls made of. Fiona asks me if music can be made under water. We plant radish seeds and beans in paper cups. I make up verses to go with the growth of the plants. Fiona's mother calls from inside. She screams like a witch. This is not yet Halloween. Fiona and I walk

round and round the tree. Leaves fall from the tree, the wind gusts, makes all the leaves shudder, then makes them fall in rhythm to the ground. We can choose to be the tree, the breeze, the wind. Who has the special instrument? Who has the drum? We can play positions beside the keyboard, if we had one, out here. Fiona could be the lion. I could be the elephant. Fiona's mother screams. I ask her, Isn't ridiculous a good word? The queen was in the parlor, Eating bread and honey. The maid was in the garden, Hanging out the clothes, When down came a blackbird, And pecked off her nose.

After We Killed the Giant

He missed us—but only by five or so feet. He fell so hard he crushed Chicago Park District playground equipment and sent a garbage bin spinning like a soup can into the parking lot. The cuffs on his blue jeans reached just past his knees, leaving pale fat calves exposed in the moonlight, more like cows than calves. His leather boots stood like Port-O-Potties, heels half lost in the earth, toes toward the stars; the laces looped and fell at our feet. We drew back, in case he kicked or rolled. But he lay still, snuffed out, a hillside of denim and flannel and flesh. In the end, the three of us had hacked at him like a piñata, and now my nostrils burned from the stench of his coppery blood, his deep rot, the sickening onion-sweat of locker room laundry or my father's wrinkled work shirts.

There was no mother. No surplus of kisses, no singing in a kitchen that smelled of chicken or cinnamon, no cool hand on my forehead when I had a fever. In my house, mothers were the stuff of fairy tales. She lived, if she really lived at all, in a faraway place called Coral Gables, or later in a place called Fort Lauderdale, or she was already dead.

As far back in my childhood as I could remember, my father, who was a licensed, much-published, waiting-list-a-mile-long psychiatrist, only gave me three pieces of advice. He considered these to be the three essential rules for all American boys, and he seemed to take pleasure in repeating them to me, whenever appropriate, in his deep, hornlike voice: *One, never walk away from a fight. Two, trust your instincts because your instincts will never betray you. Three, for god's sake, learn how to throw the ball.* To his credit, as much as I hated him, all three proved to be useful.

Stuart groaned, his arms frozen at his sides like an umpire calling safe. He dropped his axe as far from his body as possible, letting it cut into the sand with the slightest sound. Kenny tossed his own axe with a flip of the wrist. It clattered on the pavement.

"Everyone okay?" he asked. "Tim, you okay?"

I couldn't nod for him. I tugged at my wet, red t-shirt.

"Blood!" Kenny shouted, and we all jumped and shrieked again like girls. "Keep your hands away from your face! Wipe them on the grass! Who knows where that nasty thing has been?"

We knelt near the car and cried. Sixteen years old and we were crying in front of each other. Soon as we could, we stopped, tied quick tourniquets onto our tears. We moved inside Stuart's car for comfort's sake, Stuart in front, Kenny and me stretched out in back. Stuart's Escort smelled like breakfast meats, maple bacon and sausage, because of his daily stops before school with his brother Marc, a football player who never seemed to stop eating.

Stuart's brother Marc was a different kind of giant: a senior tight end twice our size who ignored us when we passed in the halls between classes. At home he could be friendly, wrestling me to the ground and sitting on me for minutes, with affection, as he watched tv. He was devoted to game shows about blind dates, and he hated when we interrupted the action with questions about his own sex life. I was fascinated to know exactly what he did, and to who, and how often. I sometimes saw Marc without a shirt on, and his pecs were spectacular: big and round as Mrs Field's cookies, his nipples like slightly melted chocolate chips. We teased him about them, and he'd flash us, lifting up his t-shirt, saying, "Yo boys! Beware the dangerous glare of my blinders!" I envied his strong back and heavy thighs, the dramatic dark curve of his biceps, his warm hands as he pinned my arms to the floor.

We cleaned our hands and faces with the baby wipes from Stuart's glove compartment and put on clean shirts. The silence seemed sudden. Already we were changed, chatterboxes morphed into mutes. We were so sobered that Kenny went back to the bottle we had borrowed from a cupboard in Stuart's mother's garage. Pure Tangueray. "Here," he said, and pressed the bottle into my hand, his hairy knee against my thigh.

"No," I said, "baseball practice in the morning." We were in a park district training league, Saturdays through August. I wasn't good enough to play on the team at school, so my father insisted I learn to play somewhere. Kenny trained in the league, too. Stuart used to play, until his father died from a brain hemorrhage and Stuart became exempt. Instead, this past summer, Stuart had taken a photography class at Gallery 37 and streaked his curly black hair with bleach so he could look like Peter O'Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia*, a brown-skinned Peter O'Toole. *Martin Lawrence of Arabia*. *Lawrence of Rogers Park*. Unlike his brother, Stuart was skinny and unsure; to compensate, he worked out obsessively, concentrating on his six-pack.

Normal boys liked baseball by instinct—the orderliness of the game, the preordained lineup, running the familiar path around the diamond in carefully measured segments. I understood the clean appeal of rules and accepted strategies. I could meet the challenge of slugging a tiny ball that was hurled in my direction; I was used to it. But to throw the ball at a specific target before a watching crowd: this terrified me. This required the most practice and applied the greatest pressure. The success of throwing a ball rested entirely and literally in the hand of the thrower. If it fell short, went long, or missed its target completely, the failure belonged to the thrower, as it had so often belonged to my weak arm and me. For years, my father had commanded, "Aim better, throw faster, harder!" *For god's sake, learn how to throw the ball.*

I did my best to change. Stuart and I had spent recent months at the gym, under Marc's confident coaching. He called us his Pencil Neck Posse. I was developing a new vocabulary of my body and its uses: wide grip lat pulldowns, decline reverse crunches, one-arm snatches and two-arm jerks. The gym had its own hierarchy of power and a grim militia of scolding trainers who attacked me whenever I accidentally dropped weights or forgot to wipe down a machine after using it. But I got stronger. My arms swelled in a matter of months. My amazing, elastic, perfectly symmetrical body—it was a concealed weapon I would always keep with me. Most of all, I learned not to fear the frowning gym staff, so rigid in their matching neon sweatshirts. And I learned how to throw.

"Where are the freakin' police?" Stuart asked, craning his neck to check on the corpse. "Big Man is huge! Can't people driving by see Big Man's big ass?"

"Let's go," I said. I didn't want to explain anything to anybody. Now I was focused on clock and curfew. For my father, no excuse sufficed. Rules were his religion, deviation his devil. At all times, there was the immediate hard fact of his fist to consider. "We should go," I said.

"Mickey Mouse town," Kenny said. He took another swig of the Tangueray and wiped his lips with his wrist. "Guys, I'm feeling mighty powerful right about now. How about you?"

Stuart fingered the little peach fuzz above his lip. "I'm at the place where ecstasy and fatigue share close quarters," he said.

"Cautiously euphoric," I said.

"Hey, are you picking your nose?" Kenny asked Stuart.

"No!" Stuart jumped out of the car, ran to a tree, and tossed his share of the Tangueray. He retched noisily and with such conviction, like a much older drunk, which I couldn't imagine him ever becoming. Stuart would have rather died than cause his mother a moment's worry.

"Why don't you stay at my house tonight?" I whispered to Kenny.

"Naw," he said.

"Come on," I said. "I'm happy tonight, aren't you?"

"My dad doesn't like me spending too much time with you or any one friend." He turned toward the window. His ears were pink and smooth as always, like fancy carved soaps.

"Tell him you slept at Stuart's. You can go to practice with me in the morning."

"The answer's no." Kenny was so strict. He was never nice to me in an easy way, the way Stuart was. He would only be sweet when he wanted something. He often seemed angry with me, but I knew that could change. His personality had a hot-and-cold quality, like a Rotweiler.

Slobbering black dogs, shiny as blue steel, had chased us from the giant's house, and the giant himself followed us from the iron gates. When we had a lead on him, we dug a hole and covered it with straw and sticks, and waited, a strategy we remembered from books. But the giant didn't even step on it. He just lumbered faster, drawing closer with each thundering stride, and toppled the thin trees in his path like volleyball poles in loose sand.

"He thinks we stole something from him," Stuart hissed.

"We left everything there," Kenny said resentfully. "Could've cleaned him out."

Bags of gold, a silver sword, a velvet cloak studded with gems—we bypassed all of that. We never thought about money. When Kenny picked up the sword, I said, instinctively, "Don't!" Of course it sang like a canary, calling for the giant. Kenny just threw it to the marble floor, as if it had burned his fingers, and the racket rang through the hall.

"We took the food," I said, remembering the roasted pig we'd pilfered from a big clay oven. Our shirts still stank of its greasy

juice. Later we lifted warm sweet breads from an open window and ate them in hiding, behind a curtain of bony birches, the hot icing glazing our fingers like glue.

Stuart stopped. "Wait—I did take something." His fist disappeared into his jeans pocket.

The car windows fogged. Stuart spewed gin in the distance. Reaching into the pocket of my baggy cut-offs, I pulled out a piece of notebook paper, folded hard into eighths. Earlier in the evening, before even finding the tree, we had reviewed our list of grievances with our fathers, revised and enhanced it. It was something we often did. Didn't most boys? Each new list was different and incomplete, but always brought me pleasure. This particular list featured:

- I. The Sin of Self-Absorption
- II. The Sin of Gross Appearance
- III. The Sin of Cold Disinterest
- IV. The Sin of Constant Disappointment
- V. The Sin of Favoring Others
- VI. The Sin of Transparent Excuses
- VII. The Sin of Physical Violence
- VIII. The Sins of Bossiness and Rudeness
- IX. The Sins of Elusiveness and Absence
- X. The Sin of Limited Imagination

I read it over. "What are we going to do with this?"

"Keep it," Kenny said. He took it from me, refolded it, and slipped it into his own pocket. "Years from now we'll laugh at it when we're fathers ourselves."

I looked to see if he was joking. These were facts: The time the two of us sang the entire score of the movie *Moulin Rouge*, acting out all the parts. The time we put water balloons under our shirts

and strutted around the pool table like Britney and J-Lo. The rare sleep-overs, sharing the double bed in his room, ripe odors in the air, heat from his body; and mornings, his straw-like hair and a chin full of stubble that he once let me feel. I replayed these images in my head, over and over, like a custom-burned CD that I would never tire of.

Kenny kept his face turned to the window, as if watching for any more trouble, and ready for it.

I knew how he felt. After tonight, I was ready for anything. I checked to see if Stuart was coming back and said again, more firmly, "Kenny, you stay with me tonight, okay?"

But he just rubbed his eyes as if they itched or stung; he wore his long skinny fingers like a blindfold.

"See?" Stuart said. His palm showed a gold coin, the size of an air-hockey puck.

"Drop it," Kenny said, as if he was speaking to a dog.

"I like it," Stuart said. "I want proof."

I understood the impulse to take something. But Kenny said, "Leave it! Leave everything, and let's go!"

We ran farther into the forest, searching for the tree that would take us home. We stopped at a quiet, thatch-roofed cottage that, like every property we'd encountered, had no lock on the door. We ate again, this time from a fruit tray, the most delicious unidentifiable citrus I had ever tasted. I had developed a formidable new appetite, a level of hunger that would take some getting used to. We took three normal-sized axes from a side shed, thinking we might need them.

Later, under dwindling golden starlight, we found the right tree. The giant stretched out next to it, his big arms folded, waiting for us. *Never walk away from a fight.*

The police finally came. News crews, too, driving their vans over the grass and mud, since the giant's body was blocking the usual entrance. We stood by Stuart's car, surrounded by these staring men, and the hot lights of the cameras made us sweat.

"Who killed it?" a cheerful reporter asked, a skinny guy with a potbelly. I doubted he saw a lot of on-air time. "Who's our hero?"

"All three of us did," Kenny said. "Sherlock." Sharp tongued; he couldn't help it.

"Settle down, girls!" a cop bellowed, his mouth so close to my face I could smell the chili dog he'd eaten for supper. "Now, which of you wants to tell me why minors such as yourselves were in the park after eleven?"

None of us answered. *Trust your instincts.*

"It's sad," the cop said, shaking his head. "In ten years I'll be cuffing you little perverts over near the lagoon."

"Hell with that," Kenny said. "We did you all a favor."

I didn't want trouble. All we'd done was climb one tree, and everything else followed without us planning it. Everything we'd done was necessary. Wasn't climbing trees what boys were supposed to do?

Imagine a tree that is made for climbing, a tree with a comfortable, forty-five degree lean designed for rest stops and sturdy branches spaced like ladder rungs as far as you can see. A tree with thick leathery leaves smelling of pine, mint, eucalyptus, leaves that fill your lungs with a new kind of oxygen and energy. Imagine climbing that tree to a place where your feet can stand firm, and you're free to wander and run, or rest and dream, and you can eat when you want to, whatever you want to, a place where possibilities seem limitless and where problems can be solved with something so simple as an axe. A place where exerting effort doesn't feel like any effort at all, which feels, for the first time in your life, like power. To think, such trees can be anywhere!

"May we go now?" Stuart asked, in the sweeter voice he used on teachers. "Surely our parents will wonder what has detained us."

This time in the Escort, I sat in front with Stuart. He switched on the radio and jacked the volume. Pure Energy, Zero Gravity, Simple Velocity. "What next?" he yelled. Nothing fazed Stuart.

"My house," I said. If we hadn't had baseball practice, I would have asked Stuart if I could stay with him. I loved weekend mornings at his house, the way his mother now presided over everything, not just the pancakes and banana bread, but the conversation; she even offered us coffee, flavored with chicory and half-and-half.

I pressed my right elbow between the seatback and the door, trying to get Kenny's attention. I waited for his touch, a playful pinch, any sign to assure me that nothing had changed between us. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I pulled my elbow back.

In front of my house, Stuart jumped up from his seat to say good night. Kenny stayed in the car. The music spilled into the street, surrounding us. Above, the beachy, cool moon had retreated far into its orbit—so recently it had seemed within reach, a secret playground for we privileged few, and who knew who else.

I hugged Stuart, my best bud. "*Bonne nuit*, brave giant killer," I whispered.

"I'm proud of us, at least," he said. He kissed me on the cheek.

Kenny got out of the car, making a big slow show of it.

My heart shot up to my throat. "You coming with me?"

"No," he said. He didn't even smile for me, just got into the front seat and turned up the music. He was like a different person.

I nearly cried. I wanted to go off on him, in front of Stuart. *Never walk away from a fight.*

My body was a concealed weapon I would always keep with me.

But Stuart took my arm. "Hey, ignore him," he said. "Relax."

I shook off his grip. When I turned toward the house, I faltered.

My father loomed under the yellow porch light with his arms folded. Mr Hardass Night Watchman. Oh excuse me, *Dr* Hardass Night Watchman. His face was obscured in shadow. He would be angry with me: about the time, or the loud music from the car, anything. Had he seen me hugging Stuart? He never watched the news. He wouldn't feel differently about me. He might never know what I was.

What could I do?

I walked straight toward him—shoulders back, sure footed, a swaggering, rough-and-tumble, regular guy. *Trust your instincts.* In one hand, discreetly, I palmed a perfect golden egg, the size of a baseball.

Corpus

When I say *hello*, it means bite my heart.
Let the blackfly spin invisible & delirious

on vinyl. Let it save me from what I can't
know. Send posthumous letters in neon,

scribble love unreadable. My body is sweet
with blasphemy & punk teeth, memories

of slamdancing underwater.
Tonight the absence of rain

is the mouth-open rush to noise:
a hurricane of wasps throat-clambering

for air. This half earth where grind
sleeps dormant, a sickness without

temperature or cough. Hold my hand,
my nothing shouts. We'll stay up all night.

We'll orgy with shake and groove,
wet whisper—*clap, kiss, watch me go.*

The Invention of Satori

Father woke up drunk. He didn't even stand before he started yelling. *Everything out of the house.* This time he meant it. Mother, sister and I carried all day. Our stuff filled the yard, spilled over the curb and into the street. Father walked around completely naked except for a sheet tied across his shoulders, his hair a wild corona. *This is it, this is it*, he kept saying. The neighborhood girl rode up on her horse to see what was going on. I loved her when she laughed but I also threw a stapler at her. Mother struggled with the refrigerator. It was my job to clean out the basement including the Russian men mother believed were saints. They had beards like tired owls, would sit all day at a card table eating old bread and drinking vodka from little clear glasses. *Everyone out*, I said, but nobody moved. When I pulled them to their feet, their skin cracked at the joints. They muttered curses under their breath. On the way out, a few dropped fingers on the carpet. The agoraphobic mice came out of the walls to scoop up the relics. Perhaps they were saints after all. Father stood where the dining room table once stood. *You see, what a parade!* There was nothing else in the house. His voice echoed off the walls.

Saturday Inhaler

It'll Saturday soon
means Dad's *tranquilo*

making Parmesan eggs
and bread horns.

Our creature beds are as
randy as a nativity scene;

Moms is crazier than goat
tethered to Stairmaster.

Saturdays, she slaves
in *mucama* rags,
running her hands over furniture
plateaus, where dust likes to graze

screaming, WHY IT DON'T
BOTHER YOU TO LIVE IN FILTH!

It'll Saturday soon
means cartoon narcolepsy

too in-front-of the tube,
sloppy pink milk like zany felines.

Means, my hair is tarantulas,
my little sister's cheeks are kites
people pilot with pincers.

Means, we have until ten a.m.
to lounge like wounded tigers
before Moms starts blasting

her folklore records,
Communist LP's,
and sobs all over her asthma.

Tar Rolling Stones Get Up Get Down

How to not rock. I'm on the roof,
patching a leak—midnight, fire-hose
rain swooshing, lightning bolts

hung like tattoos, some lunatic's disco
cage, me in it with my little silver bucket
of tar, little Mick gone go-go

speedo, gooping the roof, antbed manic
patching the leak,
briefs smeared black, tar baby in flip-flops.

Finished, I have to wash
with gas, shower... still smell
like New Jersey's crawled up my nose,

then hula music—a thimble
bongo tapping slow thips
on the nightstand: roof still leaks,

thunder applauds; I'm called back
rooftop to goo it
right this time, no jerky slaps

this time, must find an all-night steady groove
and tar unrushed like Charley Watts,
neck-tie leashed, nailing down Mick's moves,

back up in the neon closet, sharkskin suit on,
the storm still berserking, this time spread the black butter
like Mr Watts at Sunday Brunch.

Sardine

The rain's here and the river's rising. It won't stop for days. I'm wet to the skin.

Sunday, and Lum's got me stuck.

I want to shove his face down his throat and pack him up like a garbage sack. I want to crack his head on a curb and set fire to his house. I'd screw his wife if he had one.

My wife delivers papers on Sundays. We live in the swamp and she tosses news out the boat. She used to drink me under the table. I can drink you under the table, that's the thing.

My wife eats sardines on crackers with raw onion. She takes the boat out on Sundays but lets me drive it all the other times. She ripped out the captain's seat so I can fit. She used to come home by noon.

Now she says Jesus wants her and Reverend Lum told her so. I work in the garage on bullshit stuff. It's all I've got. I make squirrel traps and birdhouses and think about screwing my wife.

I whittled a dumb ass chess set. Brenda bought a book on how to play but never read it. I don't care about that. My spine is shattered and won't ever get better. I don't care about that either. It's raining on my head and I'm stuck like a cripple. I am a cripple.

Lum's gone too far. He's got her thinking without her brain. I wanna sick on him like a demon dog.

I was an electrician. I can do all sorts of things with wires but that doesn't help me now. I fell off a rig and landed on the platform. I laid there for two hours. People looked like ghosts.

Our house is right on the river. We jacked it up eight feet for the floods. Brenda used to carry me up the stairs. She told me it was

nothing. Now we got a chairlift that's like a metal cage. Insurance paid for it. Lum called it a miracle.

But the wiring's off and now I'm stuck halfway up the stairs. My legs are shrunk and I can't go nowhere. Brenda's gone in the boat. There's a revival today. She wants to get touched.

She left me in the storm this morning. I followed her to the pier but the yard's like mud. My wheels are for shit. She unstuck me.

She says Jesus provides and I say bull. It's Lum that's got her twisted. She used to drink bourbon on Sundays and rub me all over. I can't get hard. She didn't care about that. She'd get naked and cuss me real sweet. It turned my chest inside out.

Now Lum tells her that kind of loving ain't holy, so I don't know how she gets off. She kisses me like a fish on the forehead.

We don't have any money. Brenda gives what we have to Lum and says that it's an investment in our souls. I take a lot of pills.

Lum comes over on Saturdays. He tells Brenda she's blessed. I believe him. She's got light-bulb eyes.

I made a cross out of wood and tin. Brenda put it above the door. She said it's a sign I'm not lost. I told her I doubt it. We used to shoot turtles off the pier.

Brenda sold my pistol so I carved a gun out of cedar wood and stuck it in her belly. She cried and said she didn't want us cooked.

The water is up the driveway and there's a hurricane off the coast. They named it Bonnie instead of Brenda. I'm the only one home.

Brenda says a revival in the rain is what the world needs.

Lum's a soul wolf. I wanna track him down and hang him for meat. He got Brenda strange and told me she needed help from above. He touches me on the shoulder when he sees me. I want to rip his arm loose and eat it.

Jesus has a plan, he says. You'll see.

I can't reach the fuse box for the chair lift. It's in the garage. The door's over my head and I can't reach that either. This has happened before but Brenda was here. I got stung by bees.

I keep a knife and some wood on me. I whittle stupid shit that's terrible. The shavings make puddles on the blanket Brenda bought for my legs. I'm carving Jesus Christ out of pine. It smells like fire when I cut it.

The crown's hard to carve because of the thorns. I got Jesus spread out like the crucifixion and his feet point down like darts. I'm gonna strap him to my chair when I'm done. Brenda will say it's a sign and I'll let her believe it. But if Lum says I'm blessed again, I'll jab it in his brain. Maybe I'll go to prison. Maybe Brenda will come too.

The flood's on now and our pier is under water. A swamp rat is climbing the stairs underneath me. It doesn't know where to go. I'd shoot it if I had my pistol. If the levee breaks, I'll be sunk.

Juan brought four feet of water in '85. Andrew brought six in '92. We had snakes in our shoes. So we jacked up the house and look at me now. Stuck.

Brenda prays hard at night. I rub on her tits. This used to make her crazy. I wish I had a radio. I used to play drums in a band at Fred's on the River. I met Brenda there. She wore a bikini that made my heart sweat. She was sixteen. She said I played with my eyes shut. We got married in the rain.

Brenda wants a kid. She says it in her sleep and that's too much.

The levee's busted and the swell's upon me. There's water to my knees.

I see a boat coming, but there's two people in it and that's one more than Brenda.

Of course it's Lum. He wants in on my saving, but it is only for Brenda to have.

He tosses me a rope.

But I won't swim for dying.

BRUNO FLEMING

Evening in C

Selena likes blue she says, touting
her breasts in such an immoral manner
you'd rather hide in the undergrowth
of the ferns than talk to her.
Jones Dunne, the drummer who gropes
the warm-hearted wife of a mechanic who's under the bar,
looks at you like a disease still killing
his mother.

Girlie Brew:

that's what they call the drink you drink,
something pink and floating in the spew
of its foamy head. You float around the stalls
and look for familiar shoes.
You find your own name written on the wall.
Of all the places to circle and hunt for truth!

Outside, the sign on the barroom door reads:
Leave your hope here.
Pick it up on your way out.

Beautiful Freak Show

I don't pretend to have been all pink
 and unplucked, I knew nakedness,
 knew the rattle of a leg in bed.
 You rented a room from an old man
 and his girlfriend, always cooking
 bacon in the morning. The smell
 of grease, the old man's whiskers
 on my shoulder, him saying, *I've seen you*,
 and I could smell the meat of him,
 peeking from a hole in the closet wall.
Beautiful freak show, he said.
 You left the closet door open and he
 stopped asking for rent. You want me
 to strip and pose, unstrap the leg.
 What should I say to this, becoming
 someone you can show off, finally?

Interrogation

When I asked you to turn off the lights,
 you said, *Will you show me your leg first?*

I heard Rachmaninov through the wall,
 a couple making love without prerequisites.

Do you sleep with it on? I forgot
 there would be this conversation.

Do you bathe with it on?
 I need to rehearse answers to these questions.

Will you take it off in front of me?
 I once stepped into a peep show.

Over the doors, signs read: Hands off our girls.
Is it all right if I touch it?

I am thinking of a hot bath, a book.
 The couple on the other side of the wall laughs.

Maybe she has found the backs of his knees.

Story of Every Erosion

Liz and I are below ponchos in the mess
as the gutters gill and fizz
with sticks and mocha, ruminant
and do arithmetic with the sewer drain.

Ripped with umbrellas and storm logic,
we follow the impromptu stream
to the viaduct and the man-high pipe
that sums up runoff under Highway 41.

We stand jean-deep in the current,
pretend to surf. We are bad, Hawaiian, xxx.

I cut the denim from her leg with the fold-out
scissors of my knock-off army knife,
mime my hand a rivulet from thigh
to knee. You know that this thing
has an end, I say. She laughs
and doesn't get me, thinks I mean her foot.

Look at the remainders of my prints
on her skin. When I subtract my palm,
she will whiten like perch or air
in the coming season, then go red,
that touch flushing away.

Muster

This is what you got me up for? Cats-
in-the-backyard bump & grind? Hurrah for light
on cats and motion, drowsy thoughts. Hurrah
for your sister Harriet who keeps on

dumping boys like she was born to lose them.
Hurrah for my thoughts of her as she mists
the winter defrost glass on the slow drive
back from another relationship's dull

bomb and bottom-out. Wake me when it's really
morning, not this half-hearted pre-tender
pre-dawn light, not this dry ice mist, not this
scent of mint that's all over everything

like a sauce or like a net of thoughts
and thoroughfares, not this old bone Harriet
dream of leaving, not this painful-looking
cat sex mess, not this essayistic
voyeuristic watching out the window
for Icarus to wing-beat out this fog
and call it morning, call it passing glance.

Wolf Harbor Road

In Connecticut, in a state
bordering on jealousy,
I pull off and kill the engine.

My hands are fine. I rest
my face in them and look
through the windshield at some stars.

It does not matter where I go.
Inside me, like an ancient fish,
the second person, its terrible gills.

Portrait of Your Full Departure

The vision's fractured plane erupts
into a desperate cloth of wings.

Inside it, holes open. They are swallowed
by the edges that compose them.

Even the caught air feeds
on itself, thinning to a fine, blank heat.

What widens in the writhing
bears no small resemblance to betrayal.

Don't tell me how to take anything
back. In fact, don't talk at all.

Locust is an ugly tongue.



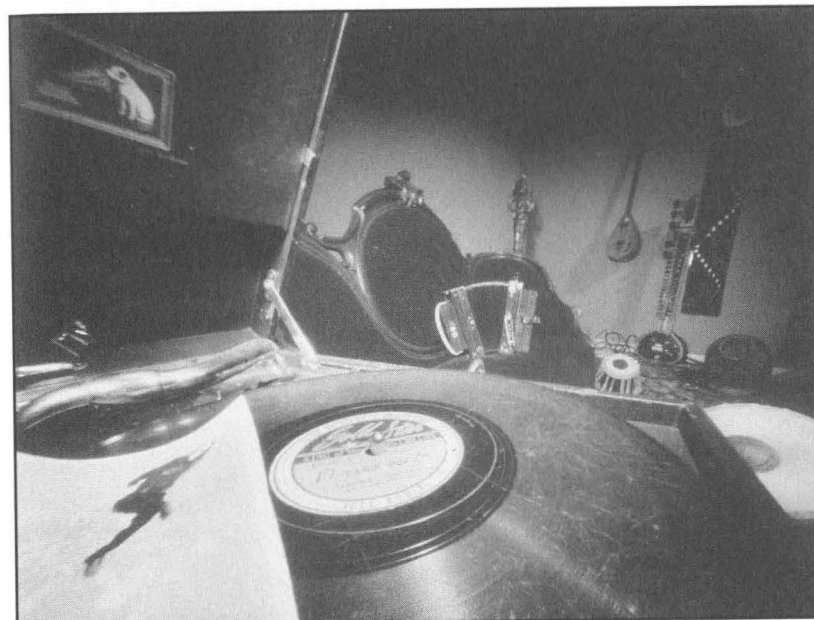
Lost Boy by Allison Petit, 2003
14.75" x 19" chromogenic pinhole print



Aspirations by Allison Petit, 2003
14.75" x 19" chromogenic pinhole print



Throne by Allison Petit, 2003
14.75" x 19" chromogenic pinhole print



Listen by Allison Petit, 2003
14.75" x 19" chromogenic pinhole print



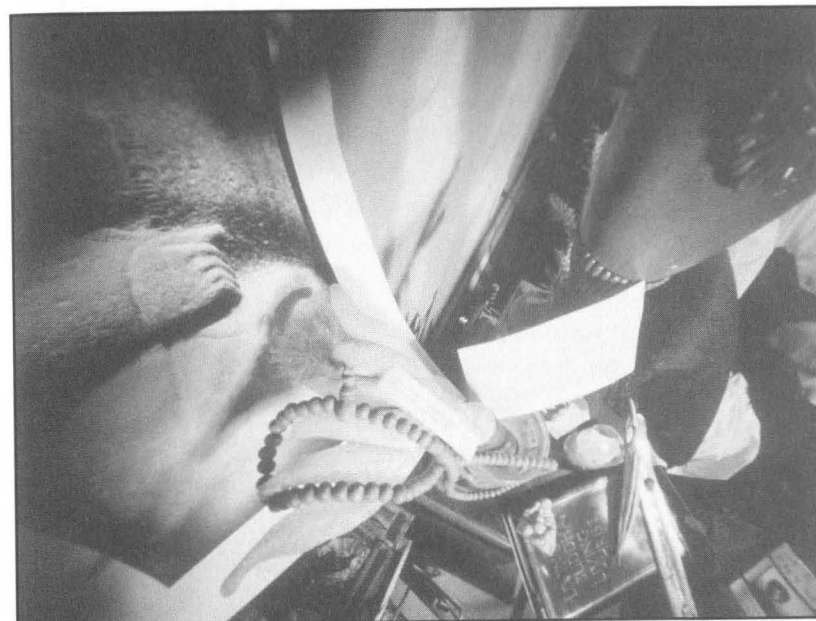
Déesse by Allison Petit, 2003
14.75" x 19" chromogenic pinhole print



Boogaloo by Allison Petit, 2003
14.75" x 19" chromogenic pinhole print



Happy by Allison Petit, 2003
14.75" x 19" chromogenic pinhole print



Meditation on Time by Allison Petit, 2003
14.75" x 19" chromogenic pinhole print

Shade

Fingernails under wallpaper
 scratching sound like palpable
 air, scatter-pattern of hands
 behind your headboard; the face
 you're sure—a third floor
 window, the peripheral whisked
 looking in—what don't you
 believe? A boy the color
 of a lightbulb cowering
 in the corner of an old
 hotel or rounding a wind-licked
 house in full flee. Not eyes,
 not corpuscles or corpses. The stain
 of shape. The sand-scrubbed
 rubbed-thin trace of veinery
 pressed into stone. A violence
 so shattering, his body not bulwark
 or ballast enough, the spirit
 jerks loose and imprints itself,
 releasing his huddled, focused fear
 like dust from a hung rug.
 Skin icing over nerve, you want
 to believe feeling evaporates, leaves
 nothing, not even
 a wet mark. Emotion a scrim
 like early morning mist or just morning
 touching bodies in their beds.

One Iota

A hand not an eye.

In the cursive miniscule.

In the lampblack.

The verses of law,
 the words and letters,
 count, re-count the fingers.

Syllabify limbs.
 A smudge on the thumb.

Snapping pages,
 armloads of pages.

Mordant ink bleeds
 figures into the hide.

Scribes, born of scribes,
 born of scribes.

Seth couldn't name things
 but he wrote them down.

Ezekiel tasted his words.

And then Jesus lowered himself
 onto the page.

Hester Prynne, Subway

Jesus said: Become passersby.

—from *The Gospel According to Saint Thomas*

A man sleeps on a subway bench,
Hester Prynne sits down beside him.

She watches flames rise around him
in a barn with a wagon and trapped birds.

She would like to travel
one of the roads that lead inward,

to take one that drops from this city—
through the alphabet, down the broken stairs,

into the dirt. Do-gooders advise her to leave
this country. Others say, *Burn her at the stake.*

Hester believes in her second coming, a place
she might go, and the train huffing toward her.

She leaves the man to his terrific party.
They're his birds, his wood. It's his stone to roll.

Hester, Downtown

The room is in disarray. I am not talking
about my mind. Some birds have only

the two notes: way up high
and down low. The only hope in town,

a moose stopping traffic on Main Street.
He is looking for the river we diverted

sixty years ago, the idea of water
like the blood of our ancestors

flowing through his veins. Still here
and gone. I am walking up and down the stairs

in the park; I am looking for the room that was set aside
for me. All I can hear is the wild bark,

the boom of a drum. Waterfall, gnashing teeth, the killer
pump. I walk up and down our violent stairs.

She and the Dove: The Videoscript

Shoot this scene long: a mass of feathers—of snow—no, of ice. My breath and body in a film of ice. I slip from it. Zoom to my lashes intact in that frozen mask lit from below by a hellish fire. Cut.

The river morphs to a cathedral's central aisle. Hairless before the priest, I struggle to speak. His raised palm bleeds a nail. There is some question about my gouged thigh. Pan the apse. A dove wings aflame to the starred vault till sunlight bursts the roof. Cut.

Medium shot. I'm veiled in baby blue, kneeling in confession. Cut.

Close-up—the confessor's finger jams the grate between us. Groping for my lobe, he annunciates a two-beat chant: Leda! Leda! My ear unfurls a mouth, and I shout.

Cut to me running, not looking back at the egg I dropped. My face, my body morphing Everyone. I'm singing. Dollar bills fall from heaven to my hand. Fade to the priest jammed in by cherubim bleeding from the thigh. Cut.

I'm running down the aisle singing Refrain! Those boys follow. Dollar bills fall from heaven to our hands. Acolytes with baskets open the door. Toss in some coin, I'm singing.

The Afterlife

I'm barely breaking a sweat in the bathtub,
lumbering under the suds and smeared water,

when a voice, squeaky as a puppet, gristly,
on strings which disappear through the ceiling

into something heavenly, I suppose, announces
that I am dead. So finally, this is that next

instant, after the leeches, the slippery transplants,
the quadruple by-pass surgery. The voice

is a little young to be God, more like a castrato
than thunder. No wonder the burning bush

never gave Moses an address or telephone number.
So I wait. But nothing follows. Meanwhile,

the water is losing its muscle tone, turning
old. Nothing that would get me out of here—

hands, feet—is working. So this is it. Porcelain
walls, skin wrinkling back to something

reptilian, primeval, a few bubbles from the brain
breaking the surface from time to time, cells

growing individual, restless, drifting away,
the pond skin riotous with microscopic life.

Rachel's Hair

My Great-Aunt Rachel saved her hair.
 When I came of age in her eyes,
 she took me down into her basement
 past a pavilion of cats, throw rugs,
 knitted mottoes, and her wedding dress
 from 1910 growing ethereal on its rack,
 moving slightly as we stirred the air,
 as if it were hungry to gobble up
 any small yellow light it could
 from the basement's one bulb, lit
 only on the rarest of occasions. Over
 in the corner was a sea chest, though
 the only sea changes in the last twenty
 years of Aunt Rachel's life were this death
 and that, each person coming to attention
 by proper name before Aunt Rachel for a brief
 inspection between the announcement of the death
 and the funeral. When she opened the cedar
 lid of the chest, I saw hair packed
 two or more feet deep, by individual strand,
 by color and anniversary and decade, almost
 by century. Aunt Rachel was so pleased
 and secretive as she showed it,
 I had a sudden fear that perhaps
 she was planning to leave it to me
 in her will. I touched a few
 of the top strands hesitatingly. I knew

at that moment if I pushed my hand
 farther down, my hand would disappear
 from this side of a lifetime, this moment,
 and emerge in the first decade
 of the twentieth century, its fingers
 heavy with rings and their showcase
 faces: cameos in ivory, Tiffany
 glass cut into miniature Egyptian
 screens, ruby bands, a raw diamond
 so fresh from the mines the new
 century had yet to walk its hall
 of mirrors, its facets, holding Rachel's hand.

The Sunglasses

I come out of a fancy restaurant with Dan, my husband of sixteen years, and our two children. It is dark outside, but in the parking lot I see a pair of sunglasses, with brown-and-gold marbled frames, lying in the dirt. I pick them up, wipe them off, try them on.

The world suddenly takes on a luster like never before. The stars glisten like drops of honey. The streetlights shimmer like balls of fire.

"Did you just find those?" asks Owen, my twelve-year-old son.

"Shouldn't you turn them in?" asks Yvonne, my sixteen-year-old daughter.

"Finders keepers, losers weepers," I say.

My kids, now golden faced, look shocked.

"You're just going to keep them?" asks Yvonne, who has recently declared herself a vegetarian for humanitarian reasons.

"I don't think you should take them," says Owen.

"If someone really cared they wouldn't have dropped them in the first place," I say.

"They make you look like a drugged-out thief," says Yvonne.

"It's good to look tough," I say.

We all get in my car, and Dan, who plays the piano better than anyone I know, suggests I not wear the sunglasses while driving at night. I take them off and put them in the plastic tray under the radio. He has just confirmed that they are mine.

The next day I put the sunglasses on while driving to work. I wear them into the office, and my co-workers' faces are fiery and devil-like. I wonder if the sunglasses are magical. There is too little magic in life. If only I had more power.

At the layout meeting, my boss is golden faced. I speak up, uncharacteristically, offer a suggestion about the color of the magazine cover we're working on. He is so surprised to hear my voice that for an awkward moment he is silent. Everyone is silent. With one bold suggestion I have become a player, a threat to others struggling for the boss's regard. He thanks me and tells everyone, right there in the layout meeting, that my idea is super. I wish my kids could see me now.

After the meeting one of my co-workers, Richard, follows me down the hall. He's wearing an immaculate black suit, like he's ready to pose for the cover of *GQ*. When he wears a black suit, I like to rile him up by telling him he looks like he's working for the CIA. Now, when no one else is around, he leans up against me and says, "Wearing sunglasses indoors is rude."

I can feel the fire burning in him. I can see orange flames flickering in the whites of his eyes. I guffaw and push him away. "I don't worry about rude anymore."

He studies me in his careful, seemingly sympathetic way. "You won't last long around here."

I shrug, walk away. I am invincible.

After work I wear the sunglasses while driving my son to his indoor soccer game.

"Aren't you driving kind of fast?" he asks.

"Speed limits are for average people."

He gives me a puzzled look. "But isn't it against the law to speed?"

He has always followed the rules, my Owen, a model student, thoughtful and polite. His teachers love him, and I do too, but they are professionally obliged to see him as one of the herd, while I see the truth—he is superior.

"It's only against the law if you get caught," I say. "In America, as long as you don't get caught, you can do whatever you like."

He's searching my face, a grin ready if I'm joking. I have his complete attention.

"You play rough if you want, Owen, push people around, knock them down. Life is a battle, a struggle for the top, and I want you to win."

He stares at me, his mouth open. I've confused him. "I know," he says, even though he doesn't. Not yet.

I stay and watch him play soccer. The overhead lights look like orange planets, the artificial grass like maple syrup. Owen, my Owen, bumps a defender away from the ball and scores a goal. I bask in the cheers. His glory is mine. I say to the other moms, "He knows how to win." I let the mystery of how hang right there just beyond the grasp of their hungry hearts. One mom compliments my sunglasses. Life is good.

I decide during the game to be more aggressive with my financial investments. Up to this moment, I've held a conservative mixed portfolio of blue chip stocks and long-term bonds built with the modest inheritance I received when my father passed away. Over the last eight years I've tried to ignore reports from neighbors and friends who tripled or even quadrupled their wealth by making riskier investments. Now I resolve that I will make a move, shift my money from its safe haven into a controversial conference center development project on our town's lake that is sure to make a pile of money even though it will detract from the lake's natural beauty.

After the game, I drive to the bank. With Owen in tow, I order a skinny young investment manager with a meticulous way about him to help me transfer my funds. Owen is bored, but at least he sees what I'm doing. It could rub off on him.

The bank clerk is obviously impressed. "All of it?" he says, staring at his computer screen.

"All of it!"

I am a shaker. I am a maker. I deserve a share of the enormous profits.

When Yvonne comes home from a friend's house, I tell her she's making dinner for herself and her brother. "That's right," I say when she stares at me in disbelief. "First I'm soaking in the tub, then I'm attending a PTA meeting, and then your father is taking me out to dinner. Meanwhile, you're making dinner for you and your brother."

She scowls. At sixteen, she thinks she owns the world. It breaks my heart almost every day to see how naive she is.

"Aren't you going to take those sunglasses off?" she says.

"Never."

At the PTA meeting I propose the creation of an eighth grade honors math class. I'm thinking, my son deserves a chance to excel. A vote is taken and the proposal passes! Just before the meeting ends, Marianne Turner, Dr Turner's new young wife, says right in front of everyone that she had a pair of sunglasses exactly like the ones I'm wearing. She says she lost them. Everyone turns and stares at me. For a moment my confidence flounders. But I recover with splendid aplomb by announcing that my husband gave me these sunglasses as an anniversary present. Everyone smiles politely. The subject of conversation is changed. Once again I have succeeded. The sunglasses are now definitely mine.

After the meeting, Dan takes me out to dinner as I have directed him to do. Wearing the sunglasses and a black evening dress, I feel invincible.

"Your new look," he says, holding my hand and gazing at himself reflected in the lenses. We wait for the dessert tray. His smiling face is golden.

When we get home, I pull off his clothes and push him onto our bed. Wearing nothing but the sunglasses, I climb on top of him. In the course of our lovemaking, various growls and groans escape me that I've never heard before. My daughter can hear, but I don't care. I want her to know about my newfound vitality.

The next day doesn't go so well. I'm wearing the sunglasses in the grocery store, buying veal, when Marianne Turner strolls by, pushing a cart full of vegetables. I wave to her, and she turns away as if she has no idea who I am. I feel like chasing after her and slamming my shopping cart into hers. But I don't. Instead I buy a second portion of veal.

At work, my layout idea for the cover of the magazine has not been implemented. They've gone with a different design. Richard claims he has no idea why. Nobody seems to know why. I time things so I'm headed to the woman's room when my boss is walking toward me down the hall. He's short and bald with a black beard that makes him look much tougher than he really is. I stare right at him as we approach each other.

"Excuse me," I say when it's clear he is not going to address me.

He stops and looks at me.

"About the suggestion I made for the magazine cover."

He is taking me in, looking right at my sunglasses. For the first time ever I notice the flickering of fire in his eyes.

"At the meeting you said it was a super idea."

He smiles wryly. "Did I? Well, easy come, easy go." He walks away.

At lunch hour I hear on my car radio that the stock market has suddenly risen over three hundred points. I do calculations of what I would have earned, and swing by the bank to shift my money from the lakeside development project back into stocks before the market gets too high. The skinny young investment manager who helped me the day before takes me to an office with a black couch in it and tells me to wait for the bank manager, Mr Trent.

"Why?" I ask. "All I want is for you to transfer my funds back into the stock market."

"I'm sorry," he says, "but I am unauthorized to discuss this matter."

I glare at him through the sunglasses. I'm getting hot. His teeth, when he flashes me a forced smile, look like red hot coals.

"Mr Trent will be right along to explain everything," he says.

A few minutes later, Mr Trent, a dour fellow of about sixty, reports to me that a lawsuit has been filed to block the lakeside development project. "All assets have been frozen pending resolution of legal issues."

"What kind of bullshit is that?" I ask.

He says, "The Lake Association claims the development project endangers the nesting grounds of loons."

I go home, call in sick, and spend the afternoon drinking red wine and watching soap operas. I am plagued by visions of Dan and myself, old and decrepit, panhandling to feed ourselves. When the kids come home, I order Owen to pick up his room, and I make Yvonne prepare and cook the veal. She is obstreperous. I have to raise my voice. Dan is awakened from his afternoon nap, which he needs before his late night gig, but before he can complain I lay into him about not doing his share of disciplining the kids and helping around the house. This, of course, pisses him off, and when he fights back by making sarcastic remarks about forcing a vegetarian to cook a veal dinner, I storm out of the house. I drive recklessly, wearing the sunglasses even though it is dark, going way too fast with inadequate attention to the curves in the road. Several times I almost have an accident, and each time I indulge in delicious fantasies about how bad Dan and the kids would feel if I did crash and die.

Eventually my anger fades. I glance at myself in the rearview mirror. I see nothing but the golden lenses of the sunglasses. Their dominance—impersonal, brazen, obscene—scares me. I drive to the fancy restaurant where I found the sunglasses. I pull into the parking lot. I drop the sunglasses out my car window, and I drive away.

When I get home, I find Yvonne lying on her bed.

"I'm sorry about making you cook the veal."

"It made me sick." Her eyes water up. "Really sick. I threw up, you know."

"I'm sorry," I say again. "That was wrong of me." I try to hug her, but she pulls away.

"I returned the sunglasses."

"Just leave me alone."

"I left them in the parking lot where I found them."

She closes her eyes.

"That's okay," I say. "I'm going through some tough times, too. But I'll tell you one thing I know for sure. I love you and Owen more than anything else in the whole world."

Owen wakes while I'm checking on him. He lifts his groggy head, stares at me.

"I returned the sunglasses."

He flops his head back on his pillow. I softly sing *If I Had a Hammer*, and while I'm watching him, he falls back asleep.

After midnight, Dan comes home. I apologize about our tiff that afternoon. I tell him I apologized to Yvonne about making her cook the veal and that I returned the sunglasses to the restaurant parking lot. He is still lost in the piano music he's been playing all night. He is happy, maybe a little drunk.

"I guess that's a load off your mind," he says.

"A big load."

He chuckles, wraps his arms around me. My earnestness amuses him.

I say, "Love is more important than money, right?"

He starts kissing my neck.

"And when we get old, we won't starve, will we?"

"Of course not. The kids will feed us."

I can't seem to sleep deeply. Even with all my ideals back in place, I feel vulnerable and insecure. The next day, at lunch hour, I detour over to the restaurant to check on the sunglasses. They're lying in the dirt parking lot exactly where I dropped them the night before. I sit in my car and watch them. I feel again how powerful I was the first day I wore them, how confident and invincible. The downer day doesn't seem so bad now. Time slips away. When I check my watch, lunch hour is over.

Dan calls me at work and asks why I didn't come home for lunch with him. I'm embarrassed, so I lie. "I've been at the library researching ways to make a comforter for our bed."

"I miss you," he replies, as if I'm not right there with him on the other end of the phone.

"I'll make it up to you," I say.

When I get home that evening, he's gone, on his way to play at a conference center in the mountains three hours north. I feel fragmented, anxious, only partially there in my own kitchen. I make absentminded errors cooking dinner. The kids complain that the food doesn't taste right. Instead of getting mad, I slip out of the house while they're watching tv. I end up at the restaurant parking lot, watching the sunglasses.

A red minivan pulls up. The driver's side door opens. A hand reaches down. When the van drives away, the sunglasses are gone.

I follow the red minivan onto the county highway. I can see the heads of at least four people in it. One looks like Yvonne's. Another like Owen's. I get close, very close, close enough to see the driver's reflection in the rearview mirrors. He's wearing the sunglasses. At night! I flash my lights, honk my horn, blast him with my high beams. The minivan speeds up. I know I should let them go, that I shouldn't chase them, but I want to warn the driver about the dangers of wearing the sunglasses, especially while driving at night.

I am less than a hundred feet behind when the minivan runs a red light. A small truck plows into its side, crushing it. The minivan

rolls, the people inside flying about. Miraculously, I shoot right through the accident untouched. I do not stop. My instinct is to flee, to get home.

I haven't gone far when I begin to shake uncontrollably. I pull over and try to stop my trembling. I am terrified that my children were in the minivan. I make a u-turn, drive back toward the accident, and get caught in a long line of stopped cars behind the flashing red and blue lights of police cars, fire trucks, and rescue squad vans. Stuck in the traffic jam, I am tortured by visions of my children mangled.

I park on the side of the road and push my way through the crowd gathered around the battered minivan. Medics, police and firemen are working at removing the driver from the wreck. They lay his limp body on a gurney. I step forward and stare at his face. He is a teenager, with just a shadow of light whiskers. His eyes are rolled back in their sockets like he's blind.

"Did you know him?" asks a medic.

"He shouldn't have been wearing the sunglasses."

The medic gives me a puzzled look.

"They're too powerful for a kid."

"You okay?" He comes up close to examine me, but I dodge away from him. When he's gone, has driven away with the dead kid in the ambulance van, I peer down through the open space where the driver's door of the minivan used to be. Lying on the shattered glass of the passenger's window, which is pressed against the sand of the roadside, are the sunglasses. As soon as I see them, I want them back. I climb into the wreck.

"You better talk to a policeman about those sunglasses, lady," says the tow truck operator as I climb out of the battered minivan.

"They're mine."

I look around for my children. I peer through the windows of all the rescue vans in the area and search through the crowd. The whole scene shines as if engulfed in fire.

"Yvonne!" I shout. "Owen!"

They would answer if they could hear me.

I run back to my car and drive toward home. The golden hue through the lenses mixes with the dark and creates blind spots. Sometimes I can barely see the road. Oncoming cars have eerie yellow auras. I wander this way and that over the center line and back, half blind, confused.

I stop beside a farmer's field. I walk out into the middle of it. Dried plants crunch under foot. I look up and see the moon, a great fireball, and every star is a glistening nugget of gold. Beyond the stars, a darker gold. I feel him, the dead boy, and I stretch my head back and try to howl. Only a raspy scream comes out.

Somehow I arrive home. The kids are watching *The Simpsons* on our big color tv. I stand and stare at their golden faces. Tears fill my eyes.

Owen glances at me during a commercial break and says, "I thought you put those sunglasses back."

"I need them."

Yvonne says, "You look really stupid wearing them."

I'm emotionally exhausted. Dan won't be home to comfort me for hours. I gulp down a glass of his special sherry and tell the kids I'm going to bed. Lying under the blankets, I try not to think. The sherry helps. First I spin around, then I go down.

My children are calling me. They're in trouble, I can tell. I keep trying to answer, but nothing comes out. I keep trying to run across a field to where they are, but the harder I try, the more violently the earth shakes and the farther away they are from me.

"Mom!" they shout. "Mom!"

I wake and my golden-faced children are standing beside me. I'm so happy they're with me that I reach out to hug them. They both step back.

Owen says, "There's a policeman at the front door. He wants to see you."

I glance at the clock. It is two in the morning. Dan is not home yet.

"I can't believe you wore those sunglasses to bed," says Yvonne.

Even in the golden splendor of our reunion, my children look terrified.

"Everything will be okay," I tell them.

Despite my assurance, they do not look comforted.

"Say whatever you have to, to survive," I say. "The world is way too complicated for simple facts."

They stare at me like I'm crazy.

I get up and walk to our front door. My children are watching me.

"Come in," I say to the policeman. He's just a kid in his twenties, with a crew cut, but the official power of his uniform threatens me.

"Sorry to bother you ma'am, but I need to ask you a few questions."

I usher him in. He chooses to stand by the front door. Very somber, he asks, "Were you at the scene of an accident earlier tonight?"

"I was."

"And when you arrived at the scene, you didn't have those sunglasses with you, right?"

I can't help but smile. "What do you mean?" I say.

"She wears them all the time," says Owen.

"Even at night," says Yvonne.

The policeman says, "Are you sure you had them with you when you first got to the accident?"

"They're her favorite sunglasses," says Owen.

"She even wears them to bed," says Yvonne.

The cop frowns. He glares at my children, then stares back at me. "One of the tow truck operators said you climbed into the minivan and took a pair of sunglasses."

"Oh."

"Did you climb into the minivan?"

"I wanted to feel what it was like."

"My mother's a little weird," says Yvonne.

"She wouldn't do anything wrong," says Owen.

"You didn't find those sunglasses in the minivan?" asks the policeman.

"Haven't you been listening?" screams Yvonne.

The cop's face turns bright red.

I turn to Yvonne. It is then that I see fire burning in her eyes. I look at Owen, who is standing beside her. His eyes have fire burning in them, too.

"I had to ask," says the cop.

"I understand," I say.

"It's procedure."

"Good night."

As soon as I've closed the front door, Yvonne blurts out, "Who does he think he is, barging into our house in the middle of the night and making accusations?"

"Scumbag pig!" says Owen.

"We should sue him for harassment," says Yvonne.

"Kids!"

They quiet. They are beautiful children. Golden. Alive. They understand the world has gone mad, like a nightmare. They understand we can't figure it out and must stick together and fight. My children. Sometimes I love them so much I don't know what to tell them.

The Open Family

There's a way to open a house like a doll's house the roof has hinges it swings out with a squeaking sound there's a way to open a family to find everyone in their bedrooms sleeping waking up it's three a.m. someone is missing someone is out of town someone is

a father a daddy who travels for money wearing a dark coat in a strange town in January it's cold the family in the house puts more wood in the stove the fire leaps up the fire leaps up the hollow walls the family can't see they are inside but we are looking

down there's a fire in the wall pulling itself toward the bedroom closet there's a way to open the house the walls are hollow like bones the mother is awake she is smelling smoke down through the roof we see the fire's tongue licking the living room its fingers

reaching for the girl through her open bedroom door its smoke arms curl into her throat the mother calls out to the family everyone stirs the house is burning there's a way to open it swing the roof back the family is moving the girl in slow motion she does not

believe anything is happening the brother is alive he leaps he carries he throws piles of clothes out the window the mother dials the telephone the black phone in the black room the smoke a gray blanket now we can't find the family they are lost in covers the phone

rings and rings let's look through the windows the girl is moving so slow so slow her hands touch things put them down she is barbie this is her house this is her mascara this is her first tube of lipstick she is pink around the edges she is asleep and walking through

fire her brother is awake his arms full of things her mother is speaking crying yelling into the phone the black phone through the black windows now let's find the family outside it is cold they are afraid they watch the house the hollow house the bony walls snap apart

the ribs fall through the heart the fire leaps up the roof slides apart the girl watches the girl's in a photograph a game the girl's inside a lined box watching there's a way to open the girl her chest swings out on silver hinges she is pink inside blooming filled with gray

Torque

Evenly spaced houses with boulder sized rips in their rooftops.
 Plywood in place of windows or no windows at all. Subset of a
 gridwork always gray as seen from the portholes of an arriving air-
 plane. A neighborhood scored by jet wash false alarms ordinary
 siren at midday midnight. The block. A stretch. Several turns away
 from the postwar flicker that drove steam shovels and swamp doz-
 ers to create. The future could derive or the future a hardening
 breath. A clean automobile beneath an empty streetlamp in easy
 sunlight. A limp all hip pair of old legs in extra belted trousers
 where an empty lot features a wet couch burnt plank brick. At the
 intersection the sore eyes of a stoplight. Electric wire crisscrossing
 why what for an old ivy wall dealership. Its jut up façade a checker-
 board. Half dusty windowglass half plywood and the one woman
 howling into a bullhorn does not protest.

Diagonals

Out of rotary telephone bells,
 back to back locomotives, papery blue forest flowers,
 spice soup clattering on the stove.

A thundershower arrived minutes late
 and who should appear without an umbrella.

Sirens hacked away across the river.

The hour could never balance and the clock
 chipped seconds off the white paint.

A mockingbird flashed its angry stripe near the clothesline.

An owl weathered the evening
 on a middle perch in the sycamore.

The obituary writer thought *he no longer numbered*
 but wrote cause of, survived by, services at.

The morning paper never got to the point
 and the sun shone its cold stain.

The mountains held their blue breath.
 Word or syllable.

A watercourse whittled a unit of rock.
 A unit of water evaporated.
 While the afternoon blew dark curtains out of the trees.

Contour

1

The arrival of one subway, all gust and lumber,
became the arrival of another, its opposite,
blowing into the dim arch of a busy station.
The conductor's voice on one became the voice
narrating stops and closures on the other
until the doors of both clapped together,
two bloodshot lights on the tail of each train.
In the shifting lines of people, in the climb,
the escalator's perfect metal stair delivering him
to the sidewalk, one man became witness,
whiteness and will, wit, wilding, and *won't*.

2

Won't jagged where the rain wouldn't build,
won't halo where the lamp wouldn't blur,
won't knuckle, *won't* maple, *won't* calm
where the cigarette and boulevard glimmered,
the walkway blossom, wet, and *won't* filthy.
He sipped a bit of cool air, the man, he sipped
outside the door, he sipped inside the door,
through a cracked crescent in the reinforced glass.
A sliver of moon skated by, orange/fictitious.
It filled the hole in the glass and after it skated off
the sense of missing became bright geometry.

3

Geometrics of waiting included slump/slouch,
a basement corner, a jangle of coins in his pocket,
Peruvian, some Canadian, and pennies, dimes.
The wind did not rumble around one stairwell
and escape when Miss Haircurlers, she heard.
The wind did not rumble around the other stairwell
and huff out when Old Mr Liberia, he heard,
because it had been a violence, instead, a sever,
a wilding, a retro 70s, instead, a corpse smiling.
The arrival of one ambulance became the arrival
of another, the contour of its blurry machine.

Tahoe

Allison had a golf ball. She used it to cheer herself up.

Whenever I get down because no one will buy a subscription, she said, I take out my golf ball and bounce it on the sidewalk while I walk to the next house, and it cheers me up.

You and your golf ball, Eddie said.

I've got an extra one, Allison said. You should give it a try. You'll see.

No thanks, Eddie said.

She gave it to me.

Allison never said much. She was pretty and sweet. Like the rest of us, she was some kind of loser. Not the same kind as the rest of us, but some kind.

Rick drove around in the van, supervising.

You spend too much time with the housewives, he told me. Close the sale and move on.

Eddie and Rick, they were the winning kind of losers. The rest of us on the crew, we were the ordinary kind, running away.

Rick was driving the van. Shannon was on the radio. We sang along till the song got to the high part and the others on the crew dropped out, but I kicked into falsetto.

Oh Shannon...

Sing it, Danny! Allison said. She smiled.

I would have done something for that smile.

I would have bounced golf balls to the moon. I would have sung falsetto till my head exploded.

Eddie drove a navy blue New Yorker.

The company bought it for me, he said. The title's not in my name yet, but they'll transfer it to me if I ever quit.

At night, he and Allison went out together in the New Yorker. One night, he told me, they climbed a mountain. City lights spangled a valley below.

I never seen a mountain like that before, Eddie said.

No golf balls for Eddie to cheer himself up. When someone would cut him off and close a door in his face, he would spit on the door. Spit would hang on the screen.

Motherfuckers, he would say.

Eddie! I said.

What! he said. Those fuckers aren't going to fuck with me!

He was hands down our top-grossing seller. He could sell circles around the rest of us.

This company's good to me, man, he said. We went to Tahoe last year for Christmas. We're going again this year. You hired on just in time.

There were distinct categories of persons home in the daytime. There were the housewives, not all of whom were bored. There were the old retired folks, not all of whom had doors that needed spitting on. There were the night workers, a surprisingly high number of whom spent their days smoking pot. They would invite us in, trays of marijuana on the coffee tables. They would give us joints. One even had a huge marijuana plant growing in a big pot in the corner of his living room, a few of the leaves already rolled up into joints, right there on the plant like thin white fruit dangling. This was far and away the best part of the job. Fuck Tahoe, man.

Eddie was easily as cool as he thought he was, and he knew it. He took me out at night in the New Yorker, shared a joint with me while the Moody Blues played on the tape deck.

Me and Allison were out here last night, he said. She's one sweet babe.

There was nothing I could say to that.

We traveled to Phoenix, stopping along the way to see The Thing. I had seen The Thing before, traveling with my Mom to Tucson for a religious revival.

We have to see The Thing, I told Eddie and Allison and the girl whose name I don't remember. She wasn't as pretty as Allison. She wasn't as sweet. She didn't bounce anything anywhere. No one took her out at night.

I would have.

I bounced the golf ball Allison gave me on a sidewalk in a neighborhood in Phoenix. She was right. It made me feel better. It would have been hard for me to feel much worse. It was a sort of wallow for me, that point in my life.

The girl whose name I don't remember, she was not impressed with The Thing. She was not impressed with any thing. I never knew what she was running from. I never knew what any of us was running from.

Tahoe I didn't make it to. Something broke inside me and Rick sent me home on a bus.

Maybe I still have the golf ball Allison gave me. I hope I do. If it wasn't the middle of the night, I would turn on the lights and hunt until I found it. Then I would take it outside and bounce it on the sidewalk. It's a beautiful night, warm and still.

Allison! Allison! I still remember you, Allison! How could I ever forget? I still have the golf ball!

Allison!

Billy Blue Face

Billy had a blue face. It was that color on account of a small bomb. He'd made it himself when he was young, fashioned from nails and gunpowder and a coffee can. It went off all over him and left dark patches across his nose and cheeks and on his chest and arms. Like freckles, only blue. His chest and arms were well developed and muscular. He was short like me but acted big. He acted big, I think, because of his blue face.

We were in the Flint Hills and it was summer. Billy and I were not in love, but we pretended we might be.

When he invited me over to ride his horses, I quickly borrowed my mother's car and drove out to his farm. When I arrived, he was in the yard with Rusty, his Great Dane.

I thought, Why not just saddle up that thing and let me ride him?

Billy stuck his head inside my window and then stuck his tongue inside my mouth and then said, "Hi beautiful. Why don't we go upstairs? My folks went into town."

His folks were in town buying him things. They were always in town buying him things. Maybe they thought things would turn his face pink again?

His bed was unmade and we undressed in separate corners of the room. Not all of his body was blue and I liked to imagine those parts of him most of all. I laid my belly under his.

On his ceiling was a poster of a nearly naked woman running on a beach. The ocean in the picture was a different shade of blue than Billy. It was majestically blue while he was more thunderstorm blue.

Outside I heard Rusty on his chain snarling at passing cars or tractors. The first time I met Rusty I was scared out of my mind.

We ate crackers and cheese on the floor, and drank caffeine-free sodas while we put our clothes back on. I rifled through papers on his desk, not looking for anything.

"You gotta work tonight?" I asked.

He said he was thinking about quitting his job and joining the Army.

"Wanna go riding now?" he said.

I said, "No, turn up this song first," and we danced in our bare feet. He didn't even step on my toes.

The name of my horse was Oleg. He was huge and clunky and had a bony back. My saddle was of the western variety. Billy was riding Jasper, named after the city they bought him in. Jasper was wheezy from pollen and insecure in sunlight.

We rode out of the paddock and up the incline of one small hill. If you wanted to say the clouds were wispy, you could. We did not get far before Oleg stumbled on some ordinary rocks. I said whoa, and I said it so loud my horse got skittish. Billy had to ride up beside me and jerk hard on the reins to calm him down.

Before long we came across the skull of a cow. It was long dead and bleached white and the body was nowhere to be found. It had enormous eye sockets, which were empty. Billy thought finding a head and no body was sort of like seeing just one shoe on the side of the highway. He said it could not be explained.

We rode on. Dust got in my nose and Oleg's nose and we both sneezed. I asked Billy, "Were you serious about joining the Army?"

And he said, "I dunno, maybe." He asked why I wanted to know, was I in love with him or something?

I had to think on it for a second. Then I said of course I wasn't.

The feeling between my legs was pleasant when my horse took a rising trot. I thought about how they would not be kind to Billy in the Army. All those blond men with short hair and all the angry drunks.

"How come we don't just ride off into the sunset?" I asked.

"We could if you want," said Billy. "Where should we go?"

I suggested Colorado.

It was hot on our ride and before long the horses were tired and had to rest under a tree. This meant we rested too. We sat in the grass, which was an ocean of bugs. We held hands. I counted the blue freckles on the back of Billy's arm. I lost count. I traced them up his shoulder and around his neck. I paid attention to the ones near his eyes. There were spots on the lids even.

I remember when he was in the hospital. We were in the fourth grade. Our principal bought a giant card, which he made the entire school sign. We were not allowed to use blue marker, we had to use red or black; people wrote things like: *it's ok* and *we still love you* and *you should not play with explosives*.

I shut my eyes and fell asleep in the grass. I saw nothing but blue in my dream.

Billy woke me up and said, "We should get back."

And I said, "What about Colorado?"

And he said, "I gotta go to work."

A vehicle came over the hill and sent fine powdery sand into the air. It made me think of Christmastime in the desert. It turned out to be Billy's parents in their extra-wheeled truck. They slowed to greet us but did not stop.

Hello, they waved with deeply-tanned arms. His precise mother in her red dress and his sturdy-boned father.

They kept moving.

As they motored past, Billy Sr leaned out the window and said, "We bought you a microwave, son. A Kenmore."

Billy growled. They were always buying him the wrong things.

Crush Mosaic

tunneled
 newspaper walled

glassed eyes,
 windowed

cheeks like a girl

cry of metal
sigh of light

clean coat
shy fingers

sorry shoulders
hidden thighs

 key hole captured

ache of pictured skin
smooth salvage

heat like a mattress
arms like clouds

breast dreams buried
gleam desire

(magazine shield)
(eye hood)

gloss contact
sold prospects

(pictured skin)

or ignore her nervous
 escape (paper)
 (hear not here)

convention (in terms of the encounter)
 (sweat it out)
 (or seize up, like chocolate)

cheeks like a girl

Reprise

and in this sun

cells bloom and shrivel

eyes shine, stripped of cover

gentle glow of grey feathers

yellow claws, delicate as diamonds

in time this heat will dissipate

in time we'll run out of surprises,

look to faces which repeat themselves,

scents from childhood,

(glass gleaming, teeth)

father's fingers on the keys,

shower of high notes on your waiting

listening mother's bent neck,

a sun like this one (glossing claws, feathers)

saying *grab, release*

saying *gleam*

saying *live some more*

Cinderella Singularity

Undress me, love,

in the second person plural

while I meet this need of yours

for amplification.

Was a shoddy sensation

of off-topic, on-font. A madrigal rain

from a mouth amok in frock,

flip-flop. Pubescent dune.

Was to raise children in the fringe

of my jealousy, its accusatory pluvial

floodplain for you. Duck duck goose bumps:

my tongue on the tip

of you, sanding. Anding you. Would my lip

stranding you stoked fire- flied. As an aside

the living room did what it could wood

to divorce its corners.

It is pouring. It is.

Feel free, my love,

to forever fuck the stella umbrella

out of me.

from *Fingernail Tales*

Blue Nail ~

If I were you I'd feel.

Half a prolapsed caricature. Locketed lunule.
Mood flooded flute barely bamboo.

Manicure. Gouache. Word heard go ache.

don't ruin it

In Hebrew
there is no present tense
for the verb "to be."

The beauty of blue
it recedes

as

if.

Nail Cracking ~

She remembers happening
on a garlic farm; harboring
an obsession for cleanliness.

A window hatches the past:
tongue as begun as tectonic.

Pterygium ~

Akin to skin. Holy strip of land. Divvy up. Divvy up.

Rise like the desert forecast an endless
amount of bedroom blue. The window,
toll continued.

I've not seen you for two months. You're worried
you'll get picked up at a roadblock, mistaken
for a terrorist.

*Change the ringer to a yodel. We could be in snow,
not sand. The Matterhorn. Our heads
clearing clouds.*

Mobile phone. What is tune to tongue.
The clank of your back
clad curfew.

*And the body did ramble during panic attack class,
during mittelschmerz*

Sky Magnolia-coaxed. Sugar-hoaxed.
So I might a mosaic of the picture
frame.

*Dearest Paz, ten years of living in Jerusalem, security
checks, avoiding crowds. Now this phobia
about holy places.*

*Pacita, the Garden of Eden was blown to smithereens
today. All I could think of was sex
in mixed tenses.*

On the podium, a self-help manual drafted umbellate fan
by a gust of wind; amplified sheer leaf shimmy
by microphone.

*Was told, Paz, would know if I'd guessed Love's name.
Was never good with labels, so I dreamed
him up as if a flood had coupled us.*

The folly of beings, he grinned, lotic in my spit.
The night pure blood-lit,
jugular.

*Pacita, anything not to die having lived this way.
The bough meowing.
The jigsaw skin.*

The feline slips into the slit of desire.
The convention room windowed
a diaphanous wrist.

Beginning

Some men

you give them a little wine, a little sex
a little critique of their most
basic personality issues and also
of the pornographically photographed sailboat
they currently think would vault them,
if they owned it,
to a whole new level of happiness

(although it wouldn't, not with that
lopsided helm)

and they're done. They bury their head in your midriff
crying,
I know you! I know what a pain in the neck you are!

Is there anything not to like about men like that?
Exactly what?
Tell me, because I don't see it.

Inside

I can't explain why I've become. —k.d. lang

Her life used to be about the music. She studied and went to school and for eight hours every day she played, she practiced, she ran her fingers up and down the keys with diligence and discipline and effort, so much effort, and how could you fail to admire such effort? How could you fail to call such effort *heart*? Yet her heart was not in it, not in the music, not in the life. Her life was *about* the music—she especially loved Chopin—but she was not *in* the music, not even in Chopin.

At home, in Matsumoto, she was good, one of the best. But here in Tokyo, it was different. There were so many students like her, so many who practiced and played and studied for hours every day. And there were those who did all that and who had something else as well, whose lives were *in* the music and you could hear the difference, she could hear the difference, that small note of confidence, of authority, of something anyway, something she could not quite articulate or express, something that was not in the music, that was not in her life, something that she knew—for this part she could hear—made all the difference. *All the difference.*

She was unhappy in those days, as a college student studying music at an all-girls school in Tokyo. Unhappy and unhealthy. Her breathing became labored, her body anemic. Sometimes after eating, her fingers flew up to her face. Traveled inside her mouth. Toward the back of her throat. She did not mean them to. They moved of their own accord. Like playing the scales—it was easy, it was rote. Her body's cycle slowed, then halted altogether. Her body apparently had forgotten how to bleed.

Her life on the outside continued as normal. She continued practicing eight hours every day, playing the scales, playing those compositions intended to improve her technique. Her boyfriend, a teacher at preparatory school, continued to stop by. Every Wednesday night, he came to her apartment, a small, shoebox of a room in a Tokyo high-rise. Every Wednesday he would come and she would make him dinner, and after dinner, they would lie down. And every Wednesday, after dinner, he would enter her and she would remain very very still. Sometimes he cried out and as he did, she would go away. Her body would flatten, take leave of itself, disappear. Her heart would slow and she could feel herself shrinking, disappearing into pale and listless folds of skin.

It continued happening, this diminishing effect, this losing of herself but not in passion, this losing of herself, this watching of the spirit as the spirit evaporates, so now, the only time she felt okay was after he had gone, after he had left her apartment, after all the food was gone, too, after everything had been—as it must be—expelled, all evidence of pleasure on her body's indifferent behalf, because it was not pleasure, none of it, not the music, not the food, not the man who came on Wednesday nights. It was duty and she hated it. She hated him, the man who entered her but could never be in her, no she would never let him in. She would hold herself back. *Men are such animals.* She hated her life. *A life of duty.* This is what it means to be a Japanese woman. She speaks to herself a language laced in fury. *You cannot dream big.*

She gave it up, the music. One Thursday afternoon. She could see no other way. She would not become a concert pianist as she had dreamed. She would not hear the note that would change everything. A shaft of sunlight hit the black polish of her piano at home. She noted the dust. The way the sunlight exposed what she had not noticed before. How beautiful the shaft of sunlight was, despite the dust it showed in relief. She was tired. The sunlight was

beautiful. The piano was dusty. She must dust. She must play. But she was so tired. She rested her hands for a moment on the keys. She knew these keys better than anything, better than anybody. Better than her own body. She stopped. Shut the piano lid.

She quit. There was no choice now but to move on. She turned to English. Again she studied—*deference, daybreak*—and again she practiced—*package, postpone*—and again she threw herself into the rhythm of a new life—*jealousy, jewel*—this time, a new language, one she had loved like music since she was a child—*buttonhole, coconut, sleepyhead, snowdrift*—one for which she had a certain *proclivity*, one she in which she had demonstrated *proficiency*. She threw herself into the language and memorized the vocabulary and studied the grammar and practiced her pronunciation. *Envelope. Etiquette. Hover. Huddle. Practice. Spacious. Sparrow. Narrow. Uproot. Uppermost. Wayward. Whisper.*

And after college, she made English her livelihood, she made it her job. She returned to her hometown, taught at her hometown's highest ranked high school. She was good to her students, broke the lessons down into manageable parts, encouraged them to study, to move beyond, *Hello, my name is Emi. I like rice.* But to study for what? In case they might travel? She wanted to travel. She wanted to leave. To leave the mountains circling her city, to leave her parents who thought her a failure—she has not married yet, after all; she would never marry—and to leave her job, this school, this room. The teachers' room where everyone was so unfailingly dutiful and polite. *O-saki ni shitsurei shimasu. Gokurosama. O-tsukaresama.*

Sometimes she missed the music. She still loved music, still loved Chopin, still loved his ballads, but rarely did she play them anymore what with her new life, her new job, her schedule and such, all the duties of being an English teacher, all the classes to prepare, all the notebooks to correct, all the *enkai* to go to, those mandatory teachers' parties where the male teachers got drunk and from underneath the table, touched her thigh. The man from Tokyo, from

Wednesday nights, he was gone, he never called anymore. *Thank goodness for that.* She spent evenings at home, correcting student paper then studying for hours each night on her own, learning the meanings of dozens of new words. She was entering a new level of language, entering a brand new discourse. *Apprehension. Clandestine. Dissonance. Indelible.* She listened to English-language tapes. She joined a conversation group. She found an American teacher, took lessons one-on-one. Her teacher pushed her. The words continued, they piled up. *Nebulous. Odyssey. Palpable. Paradox.*

She battled her shyness, fought against her nature, braced herself from the desire to hide. She was used to hiding, to wrapping herself in the formalities of the language. She knew how to use words like a kimono—to beautify, to cover, to constrict. Instead, she opened herself up one word at a time, loosened the *obi*, attempted to articulate herself. She used the first-person pronoun. She made distinctions—I *prefer beds to futons and rice to bread*—and began to reason, began to elaborate, all in this foreign tongue. She learned more words, more phrases, more subtlety and nuance. And as she studied, her fluency grew. She committed herself to learning the meaning of idioms, those illogical, dreamy ways of expressing thought. She learned what it means to be *between a rock and a hard place* or what *going without saying* suggests. She understood—this one was easy—what it means to *play one's cards close to the chest*.

From the outside, she remained a model of maturity, *as cool as a cucumber*, calm as can be, her skirts long and neatly pressed, her nylons never run, her blouses clean and white and feminine. Her hair was long and black and shiny and thick and she pulled her beautiful Japanese hair into cheerful braids or a single elegant ponytail, one that reached all the way to the middle of her back. But there were changes occurring, shifts from within. Some rhythm inside her had begun to move, and it was to this rhythm inside she was starting to submit.

One day, as she studied prepositions, all the differences between those tiny words like *in* and *on* and *under* and *near*, something happened, something so innocuous that she didn't have reason to get nervous, that she didn't have reason to anticipate any trouble, to cultivate any fear.

In the classroom. On the desk. Under the book. Near the woman. There was a tape. A small homemade cassette on which her American teacher had recorded a variety of songs. The songs were sung by women's voices. And from this variety of women's voices there was one in voice in particular that stood out: a voice as clear and compelling and filling as water, a voice that understood what she herself could not begin, through music or English or anything else, to adequately express. That the cravings were constant, relentless, alive. That the cravings of the body were impossible to deny.

She listened. She wept. There was something in this voice she understood. She went to the library to find out more. Checked out books. Read the biographies one by one. Bought every one of this voice's recordings. There was so much to look at, so much to hear. She marveled at the ease of the voice, the ease of the body from which the voice came. There was a picture of the woman with the voice gracing the cover of an American magazine called *Vanity Fair*: a beautiful woman dressed in a man's clothes: pinstripe trousers, suspenders, *the works*; she sat in a barber's chair; a voluptuous model shaved her smooth man-woman's face.

And through her studies, her obsession, she knew: *this* was love, to be inside your life; *this* was love, to wonder so. After that, she changed. Everything changed. *You changed everything*, she said to her teacher, the one who had so casually, so innocently handed her that tape. *Everything*.

She moved to San Francisco. Walked in Castro. Watched the people. The men and the women. Especially the women. She had

never seen so many beautiful women. So many women and all breathing this same new marvelous air. She studied the large women in their Indian shirts and their flowing skirts. She studied the hard-as-armor women in their t-shirts and biker shorts. She studied the women together and apart and she studied the language and she practiced as she moved through the streets, but now the study was in service of living a larger life, of getting underneath her own skin. She made friends. Classmates now. Other graduate students at her school. She joined a fan club and wrote fan letters to the voice that had, she believed, taught her to live such a life.

She fell in love with someone. Not all at once but one letter at a time. For the first time, now, she understood. The words *head over heels*, they meant something real. She was head over heels in love. She wrote letters every single week. This woman, too, was a fan of the voice. They talked about the voice and their past lives and their present worries and what their future together might mean. Such funny syntax: *their future. Two people. One future.*

They sent pictures, then met. Entered a new stage of their affair. And now she let this woman go deep. Inside. Her mouth. Her pores. All over her hair. Into private places where no one had ever been before. She understood what it meant, this phrase, *to get under someone's skin*.

She cut her hair. Started wearing pants. Began to travel to places she had never traveled before: to small towns in Alaska, to out of the way places in Canada, to all the places where the voice had ever lived. She made a pilgrimage, she made all kinds of stops, she created a constellation of dot-to-dots, traveling to Nashville, that place where so many voices have sung, and Nashville like the other places, it made her weep.

She wondered, is this why a woman travels? To weep over cities that do not belong to her? To make herself over in a foreign place? To learn the language that will give her back her voice?

She was fluent now. Inside.

Just thinking of kimono, she said, makes me ache.

Years later, she visits her American friend, the one who had been her teacher, the one who gave her that tape. They sit on the floor of a square room of an apartment in a sturdy Midwestern state. It is hot tonight, the hottest it has ever been, and they are wiping their foreheads and drinking wine and getting flushed and remembering how they used to meet in cool Japanese cafes to drink coffee and eat chocolate silk cake.

You changed everything, you know, she tells her friend.

I changed nothing, her friend says. All I did was hand you a tape.

She thinks of the day her friend left Japan, how her friend had been crying, how her friend could not be consoled. It was over some man, some distant Japanese man, and her friend, the American, said she couldn't help it, she loved this man though he didn't love her. The friend was bereft. Beside herself. Sad. So many words now to describe one sorry state. She took her friend to a jazz cafe where the two ate cheese toast and drank cafe au lait and then she took her friend to the train station to see her off and she held her friend's hands in hers and clasped them tight. So there they were, two women, two friends, one on a train, ready to leave, the other on the platform staying home, one eager to stay, the other eager to go and both of them stuck. Two women. One with her wild and wavy reddish blonde hair, the other in her straight black braids. And both of them crying now. And all that talk between the over the years and still so many secrets, still so much neither one could say.

Maybe that's why, she remembers thinking—maybe that's why a woman travels. For some moment of parting just like this, some scene that's sad and swollen and secret and strong.

Tonight, then, what can she say to her friend? That she had not changed? That her friend had not changed *everything*? She would

not lie. She would not look away as she has done in other moments that meant so much. She would look at her friend. She would be direct. In Japan, it is impolite to look someone so directly in the eye; it impolite to speak so freely what weighs heavy, of what is on the mind. She wants to say so many things, that her desire had been fierce, her desire had been huge: to marry the spirit to the flesh; to begin her real life. There had been necessity—there always is—in doing that. Her life had been at stake, something vital she understood was essential in life. And to save herself meant changing *everything*, and to begin, there had been that voice, there had been that tape.

I'll tell you something I've never told anyone before. She speaks calmly now with a note of authority that those who've been saved recognize. Her friend hears the nuance, that small but all-important shift. She smiles to think how far they've come.

When I heard that voice, that voice on the tape, the blood in my body—that is when the blood in my body began to flow.

BRIAN BRODEUR

Tall Trees, Still Water

Already the bluish algae
blossom from the river's swill
where the first skunk cabbage waits

to slowly open like a fist;
dusk comes down the hill
& touches, for a moment,

everything: deer tracks, this stand
of birch, a pebble in the road—
all the dimmed places—

even the smallest veil-thread
of last season's spider web
trembling in the window of

an abandoned car;
which is all, I tell myself,
the wind knows

of what its body looks like:
cow spittle, tension wires,
the legs of a bottle fly.

Nor the Splendour of Your Dark Hair

*Despair makes here no difference,
yet a difference is made by despair.*
It is impossible not to quote despair,
but it has no context, and is bound
but speechless in the face of sorrow.
Despair calls, but returns no calls.
Despair, in love with lack,
has a local address and a name
in the directory, but the listing is a fiction
concealing a production
company. Despair is making a film
of itself in the back row, watching.
Despair is the star among the stars,
as if seen from a fabulous distance.
Despair is its own autograph, its own
parallelogram, its own champagne
cocktail, its artifact, the unengraved
equation that resolves the underlying
blur in its own eye. Despair is convinced
and nearly holy. Despair is convincing
no one. Despair is on a plane
that passes over and over
while a stranger in a tuxedo
passes someone below a clipped cigar.
Despair remembers constantly
the mortal vision of love, the stunning hour
dressed in glittering, light-filled black.

Despair, dear god, holds out
its beautiful naked hands
in the blue light of neither night
nor dawn, and whispers
midway up the carpeted stairs,
whispers, whispers, *hush*.

His Little, Nameless Acts

Loneliness on Wednesday
 signed the amicable papers forever
 dissolving et cetera. Loneliness wants
 a father for its children. Surprise!
 loneliness wants to misspell and say
 to its own best image of itself.
 O we wait, we wait with loneliness
 for some glad, obsolete thing to say.
 Loneliness is happiness is privately depending
 on memory's imperfect recovery
 of fleeting moments of joy.
 Loneliness is uncovered
 in the cold wee hours of spring,
 the comforter damp, and thin as hair.
 Loneliness considers self-pity
 and hefts it like a rusted tool.
 Loneliness has purchased
 black jeans and searches the folds and leather labels
 for a golden thread to stitch the heavy cloth
 closer to the bones. A shirt of raw silk
 clothes the chest of loneliness
 halfway up the stairs. The oven creaks
 open and loneliness lifts a spoon
 to baste a small split bird
 with butter and rendered juices.
 Loneliness does not, as one might
 expect, go to the movies alone.

Loneliness is afraid of being
 seen in a posture of loneliness.
 Who will wrap a present
 or an arm around the credulous density
 of a lonely body? Loneliness
 says everyone, waxing philosophical.

Later, Always Later

It's like being lonely for clothes
 Or days that have been safely lived.
 Graffitos of fireflies describe
 One's thoughts at the end of July,

Having wandered from dinner
 To the edge of the conversation—
 Murmurs mingled with murmuring
 Night sounds—to stand looking into

One's own dusky places, from which
 The better self, the companion,
 Emerges with a glittering eye,
 A scripture on the upturned lip.

From Now On

From now on there will be no more of this
 Idle turning of pages, no pausing,
 And there will be no more talk of poets,
 Those bastards, and no more gooseberry jam.
 May I never feel my feet in the dust
 Or dream of Andalusia again.
 From now on there will be no more guitars.
 The crows will drag me awake tomorrow,
 As always, and the sunlight filter through
 The ficus, and the water chill my bones,
 But there will be no more talk of orchids
 And no more thinking about Iowa
 And no more twisting your words into bread.

The Lost Barges of Pánfilo de Narvaez

November 1528

The sharks twisted around the pale flesh of our dead notary
as the body slowly descended deeper than we could see.

The captain's bare feet surged back and forth on the planks.
He stumbled but never fell. He spoke, but no sound came

from his words. Nevertheless we tried to comply with orders,
drawing water in a net fashioned from fishbones,

clipping Martín's toenails as a sign of courtesy to the dead,
chewing strips of the broken waterskins for our meat.

We all rested at last, on the coast, when the captain,
asleep on his barge, rode out unwittingly on the tide,

oarless, the mast broken, and without food or water.
We could only shudder at his fate, alone under the sun.

We were much better off where we had landed, crabs
walking in and out of our eyes, in and out of our mouths.

In the Field

A soddenness at dawn,
the silver lights of April
diminish from daybreak on

Tumescent weeds in a sandy plot
where a girl rides an old horse,
an animal on an animal rolling side to side

My skeleton turns to respond

Sorrel haunch quivering
under a willow in the rain.

Vectors: Arrows of Discontent

Vector 1: U.P. to Down

They called us trolls because we lived for nine months below (that is, south of) the bridge. The Mackinac Bridge connects the Upper Peninsula of Michigan with the lower peninsula. For the five miles of the bridge, all you see is water and sky, blurring out at the edges. People died erecting its towers and suspending its cables over water three hundred feet deep—the body of at least one man trapped in a concrete tower. In high winds, tiny un-American cars like mine have been blown off the bridge, down to the storm-blackened Straights of Mackinac. I imagine the impact every time—flying free from the car, the beautiful water like an anvil driving the bones in my toes all the way up into my soft neck.

Some people who live far from the Great Lakes don't even know that Michigan comes in two pieces, disconnected by water. The lower peninsula looks like a mitten, a comfort to trolls far away from home, who can always, when asked by strangers where they're from, raise their right hands, palms forward and lined like road maps, thumbs out to the side, and point to their home town. But the mitt of Michigan is not charming to the billy goats above the bridge. Yoopers, as they often call themselves, are surrounded on every side by the most fresh water on the globe; they're flooded with evergreens and wild animals and independence. Even though they're attached by land to Wisconsin, Michigan's downstate capital, Lansing, rules them. Detroit, in turn, through its sheer size and auto industry clout, rules Lansing, and yoopers hate Detroit in every way.

That's where we were from, Detroit. During our summers in the Upper Peninsula, the yooper boys I knew told my sister and me they felt sorry for us, all the secret ways the city must be ruining us. To live where things are assembled and the noise, the grease and sweat that must work its way into our skin. And the stench of the Three Sisters smokestacks, and the Rouge River, the Detroit River, none of which they'd seen. But they could imagine the scent of things burning that never should have been things in the first place. And the blacks. The blacks with their hot crack pipes and babies and guns, which were not at all like their own guns. To accept concrete and traffic and crime and the constant hazy glow which unravels the significance of stars; to live by deforming, more and more every day, what we had been given, down to the compacted dirt under our feet. How could we stand it?

They said all of these things in ugly or touching or frightened or silent ways. And I for one believed in places that didn't look humbled by humans, where more things grew than were produced, where I could thrill myself for whole moments at a time that I was the last person on earth. I believed those boys were right and I was, by some misfortune, a troll.

Vector 2: Downstate to U.P.

Most of us downstaters get as far as Mackinac Island: we take a hydroplane ferry across the Straights of Mackinac, eat fudge, swoon around the Grand Hotel, pretending we have erased crass modernity, and secretly complain because the island doesn't allow cars.

Those who actually cross the bridge find that the U.P. is at least ten times as big as Rhode Island and has only one area code for its sparse population. The seven-month winters and towns of thirty or forty people drive off the weak and the ambitious. The U.P. might as well be Alaska—ours only because we're greedy. And, like Alaska for its gold, it was prospected for timber and shipping routes

almost two centuries ago by the shy, the sturdy, the malignant, and the insane. But this is just the history of America, distilled.

On their daunting, isolated spit of land, most visiting downstaters want yoopers to have grown different features, like the dim eyes of cave-bound fish, or the sharpened beak of a finch on its own island. And yoopers *are* different. But when we say “different,” what we really mean is “quaint.” Like the Amish, a benign repository for our nostalgia. We want hand-hewn roadside stands with gooseberry jam, maple syrup, smoked whitefish, venison jerky, and warm, fluffy pasties. We expect hand-knotted lace curtains and staggeringly neat woodpiles and windowboxes. But trailers aren’t quaint, and neither are four-wheelers, snowmobiles, cars up on cinder blocks, Schlitz, and satellite dishes on sagging roofs. So, we snicker at the Bambi killers Up North, knowing we would live better if it were ours *every* month of the year. We would make it warmer and easier to shop.

However, another breed of downstaters, like my family, perches nervously in their suburban homes most of the year, waiting to snap alive in the U.P. for a few summer months. My suburban family heated our house with a wood stove, cut and split the wood, raised and canned the year’s vegetables, made our own clothes; in short, we did everything we could to live in a time when living required more effort. So when we packed the car up tight and drove north, it was understood we were going home. Of course, we too noticed the satellites, the Schlitz, the propped up cars; and, frankly, we needed them in order to claim we liked the wilderness and its rough love better than the yoopers did. A favorite sentiment of my parents as we’d watch a pink sun drown itself in Lake Huron, our bathing suits still wet, sand in the seashell curves of our ears, quiet everywhere except for the rhythmic wash of the waves and our own breath which were one: *Remember this when we’re trapped downstate in the middle of the crowded winter.*

Vector 3: White to Red

Though for most yoopers extra money doesn’t come easily, many now spend it at the reservation casinos. They drive onto the tribe’s dry land, a country unto itself, and look out the sides of their eyes at anyone with burnished skin and cheek bones that could gut fish. They talk about the reservation houses—prefab, one just like the next—and how they know the dealers are all tanked up. Won’t it be easy to out-play those shaky red hands? From the blackjack tables they can see the tourists arrive in too-fancy clothes, checking and re-checking their hair with their fingers, buying miniature tomahawks trailing turquoise and yellow chicken feathers. These locals sit in their stiff polyester baseball caps, toss their chips on the felt, throw down their hand when the cards betray them, and lob comments towards each other—terse, witty little word chips. They don’t meet the dealer’s eyes.

But there were no casinos when I spent summers there. There were special fishing rights instead and boatfulls of resentment. White locals’ barely-spoken sentiment was: Indians could fish out of season, use nets that caught fish at the gill, just behind their panicked eyes; Indians didn’t care if the fish was big enough, they’d keep it out of spite, its belly tight with unused eggs; they would eat anything: bones, scales, bowels. If only they realized how much they didn’t deserve, how much we could do without their bird talk, clicking tongues, and smoky breath, their deadly memories.

Vector 4: Red to White

A second cousin of mine who lived up there, a redhead with skin the same color as the whites of his eyes, married a tribeswoman. We didn’t treat her badly, not even behind their backs. But we stopped talking when she walked among us, almost as if she were already a spirit or a sleek wolf, and we looked at her with wonder, unable to work the hinges on our jaws.

Vector 5: Summers to Locals

Summers are people who spend their summers in the same place away from home every year. Summers are a special flavor—like cotton candy back when you could only get it at fairs or the circus. You know the fair will happen every year, and every year the taste is at once familiar and brand new. Away from home, summers have an opportunity to be lighter than air, to shrink away when you try to touch them. We squandered our spun sugar.

Even though my sister and I wore hand-me-downs and home-made pants, we lived in Detroit and read *National Geographic*, we'd been to both coasts, we'd been to Europe, for god's sake. We could have unscrolled scorn, like maps, around us, but we never spoke of these things with our locals. We figured what could have given us power in Detroit, like Europe or hair spray, was a liability in the U.P.

Summers are displaced people: we learn not to be at home at home. But we knew enough to need a home and so we wanted their home. We wanted to be more local than our locals. All summer we swam with them, ate Zingers and sometimes venison steak with them, looked through their yearbooks with them, fell through the rotten boards of their treehouses with them, got summer jobs with them, drank in the woods with them, sometimes we kissed them, broke our hearts with them. And then, every September, we drove back south without them.

Come the next June, we needed them to circle us, sniff our hair, knock us down, and accept us back with them, as one of their own.

Vector 6: Locals to Summers

Let's face it, my sister and I were fresh meat to the local boys. Their charms had become stale to the local girls by the time we'd discovered each other. They recited every story they knew by heart in accents that made us giggle—*oh yah? Tell me aboat it, eh?* They smiled at the beautiful miniatures of themselves in our rapt eyes.

When kids realize the end of their road is not the end of the world, they wonder if they could have fallen into a better place, a better spread of chromosomes. They are on the verge of a dissatisfied life, a grown-up life, the life of a summer.

Sure, they thought they might eventually get laid, but what they really wanted, what we *did* give up easily was the sense that they had fallen, by the love of no flimsy god, into the best place on earth. Their wondering was over and their dazzled lives could begin.

Vector 7: Summers to Tourists

They stayed in the handful of rental cabins down the shore from us and pulled in with inboard boats behind too-shiny trucks. They came to fish and slap mosquitoes from their pale thighs. They stayed for a week or two, thought it was pretty, complained about the sulfury well water and how the fishing isn't as good as last year. They *used* this place, but they didn't *need* it, and it didn't dictate to them what was beautiful and true for the rest of their lives. Oh how my sister and I curled our lips against them, these "tourists," the word as bad as "cunt" or "bastard," words we never would have used. Even the tiniest dogs in the pack will look until they find one tinier to nip.

Vector 8: The Sparkling-Eyed Boy to Me

He attached himself to me from the first; I don't know why. He didn't like make-up on girls, and I wasn't allowed to wear it; I didn't know how to flirt. Maybe it was as simple as that. Whatever the reason, we stuck together, as friends, for years while I abused his truer feelings, pining for another local who, in turn, abused my feelings. There is nothing new here. We were practicing for life: neglecting what you have and who you are for what you can't have, who you won't ever be.

But we never scorned where we were; we knew what beauty stitched itself into the shifting moods of the water and the serious

pine trees crowding right down to the water's edge, daring us to walk among them. He loved with loyalty. He would never leave this place and be from somewhere else, struggling to breathe through vestigial gills. And, as I got ready to go to college, he knew before I did I could never stay.

Simply, he needed to be loved. He needed to hold a woman in his arms every night, have her turn to him and tell him he smells like lake water and tree bark, the back porch step needs fixing, and won't it be funny when they're sixty and still touching each other skin to skin in the middle of the night. He needed a wife. And he married one three years after I left and didn't return.

Vector 9: Me to the Sparkling-Eyed Boy

How do we make meaning out of what does not abide?

He lived, lives still, in a town (about three miles from where my family has a cabin) of maybe forty people and a general store, post office, restaurant/bar, and Catholic church. I can't remember everything about him as well as I'd like, and, of course, I have no way of knowing what I've forgotten. A few pictures I have of him, though, tell me much of what I need to know. They were taken during the town's centennial celebration (1879-1979) and published in a little book commemorating the festivities and the family histories of the area. He was only nine or so (we wouldn't meet for another three years) but he got his black and white photo in the booklet twice. In one, my favorite, he is in a rocking contest, propped up in a large rocker. Cushions protect his bony frame, his knees meet in the middle, and his feet fly out to either side, like the hooves of a new colt. But I'm most interested in his face: he's pushing it toward the camera, a smile so tight across his freckled skin his eyes are nearly pinched closed. This is a being capable of feeling joy through his whole body to the tips of his teeth. This boy is not mean, nor is he afraid. The centennial booklet belongs to my grandmother and

she keeps asking for it back, but I make excuses, put her off. I can't give up that image of life.

I have another picture that might help to explain. It's a picture of me taken by the sparkling-eyed boy with my parents' camera. I've always liked the picture, probably because it's anomalous: I'm fifteen or sixteen, wearing my sister's clothes, and I look pretty and grown-up, like the girl someone's going to marry. I was neither of those things, though, and I hadn't yet agreed to go out with him. I'm looking at him over my left shoulder, something unmistakable in my eyes—the knowledge of being loved. I wasn't sure what made me lovable to him, I was just grateful that, no matter how I tested him, he stuck around, always willing to show me his heart. This was a boy I could count on.

These vectors are about permanence and temporality—two equally strong poles of human yearning. Death is tragic, we feel. The death of love, also tragic. Another birthday, a sinking helium balloon, the slow distortions of memory, tragedies all. Most of us need to think these things won't happen to us, so we make choices that might root us to our selves: we get religion, or get married, buy a house, have a kid, wed a land that means everything to us. But then, there are summers.

I admit, as much as I am in love with the U.P., I am terrified by sameness. The thought of not periodically changing my life is like an unpacked steamer trunk on my chest. I miss that place every moment I'm not there. I miss that boy, too. But, unsatisfied, I left. And every day I have lost them, they have become like a soapstone in my pocket, shaped less like themselves than the heart of my hand, wearing to the grip of my fingers, grooved with the lines of my palm.

The Idea of Nothing

Out of nothing, I
become nothing and will
leave again for it,
the nothing out of which

the stars boil up each
night, I know, out of nowhere,
the nothing out of which,
magically, I take my breath

and then quietly return
my old breath to sink in it.
And so it goes, this
meeting of my heart's knock

on nothing's door that
is never answered at all.
And the river of my words
flowing out to nothing's sea

and drowning there so that
everywhere I run into
it and down every road.
Who says that the sunlight

here can make a difference,
that the world we see
is real? I know that
the world dissolves before

this simple idea of nothing.
And bows before it as I do.
Soon my bones will bow before
it, and my teeth and hair.

Orlando reads The Metamorphoses

Sex. Change.
Disguise the head.

Devices, sweeping transformation like silver.

Craft is guilty—consider a map
closed, holy, a heaven.

Louder the great tides, and then a great shout
whose arms can wrestle the greatest whales.

Little figures breaking, or basking
on the rocks like gnats on the surface
of a river,
and each had darkness pressed.

They were sisters into this darkness,
men and beasts,
alert and the mouth open.

Above in the sky,
woods and distant hills,
the zodiac was winter.

+

She lolls on his flank,
dusts the snow
from her noise—
some sort of commotion.

It was a little book
changed her into a man.

+

While this went on in,
the mast shudders and cracks.

She saw always the glistening
dark jungle where fierce beasts
in violent see-saws from life
begin to quiver and tiny
black eagles were flying from.

+

Apollo, to no one's surprise,
tee-heed and hee-hawed again,
and only that was real.

No fire on earth could
think the heavens were crazed.

+

What to order or what to forbid?
There is no stopping damp,
it gets with such rough hands.
After all, the feasting was at its height.
He is ruined and cannot
order his muscles.
A black man was waving his arms.

+

"The walls is sweating!" she wept,
real tears which poured
upon her finger in the shadow.
Nothing in war or peacetime
flashed her yellow hawk's eyes
in those hot flames.

[all text collaged from Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and
Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*, translated by David Slavitt]

ALICE GEORGE

Spider

The second I began to smell myself
I knew why it was still summer.
All things radiate from my spine

if I keep desiring the world.
Cold will never establish itself,
and leaves will never blacken.

Have I been too outward in my pride?
Displaying my ardent heart,
my splendid children?

I am warm with banishment,
I am one, yet prolix,
counting threads all atremble.

The math slinks out of me
this way sometimes as I cluster
and cast, sticky with want.



The Other Side of Heaven by Michelle Muennig, 2003
66" x 42" oil on canvas

LYNN BYRD

Impossible Perspectives: The I of the Beholder and the Eyes of Illusion in New Works by Michelle Muennig

Have I been hypnotized, mesmerized, by what my eyes have found?
—Natalie Merchant

The slightly whimsical, narrow, pink, two-story Marguerite Ostreicher Fine Arts Gallery is a wonderful space for exhibiting and viewing Michelle Muennig's two-month show "Paintings and Works on Paper." There is quirkiness to the show that both underscores and undercuts the Surrealist roots that Muennig follows in her art.

The exhibit, itself, is a tour of the building. Forty pieces are displayed carefully and coyly in the two-story rectangular gallery. Many of the smaller paintings—done on handmade paper and unframed—are stuck to the walls with special pins: the kind used for insect collections.

The show opens with *The Other Side of Heaven*, which sets the stage, tongue-in-cheekily, for the entire exhibition. Two empty dress forms, posed on the edge of a cliff, occupy the foreground with a body of water meeting the horizon behind them. One of the forms is covered by a diaphanous red gown with an open bodice. This form wears red slippers, evocative, perhaps, of Dorothy's.

A mast forms the spine for this figure, and from its tip is attached a sail. It billows above both figures into a crescent moon with a magic eye attached as flag and/or anchor. The suggestive, but ultimately indecipherable fragment XTREME XTION is lettered in red around the eye. A second skeletal form has a keyhole head but no face. Only its shadow is full. Fancy barrettes, hat pins, a toothbrush,

a light bulb, kitchen tongs, a Buddha, the magic eye, and a whistle are all tucked around the footless skeletal form in a parody of a body's neural pathways.

The Other Side of Heaven is still this side of heaven. The magic eye itself is powerlessly pulled along by wind and sail. It may, rolling up to the left, catch a glimpse of something the viewer cannot see, but we can't be sure that anything is there at all.

The show continues through a thirteen-piece Alice sequence on the first floor. True to their allusive story, these drawings range in size from 15 x 22 inches to 6 1/2 x 7 inches. Silhouetted rabbit faces people these pieces as do disembodied baby faces and bibs, and a disjointed arm dangling a pendulum which refracts a diamond's gleam.

Immediately after the Alice series is displayed *The Blinding Brilliance of Truth*. In this oil painting, a young woman in a sheer dress gazes into a mirror. Because she has turned her head away, the viewer sees only the profile of her face along with the reflection of her eye in the mirror; the eye is magnified and distorted. It appears to gaze up and left. An important symbol in several of the works, the eye refuses both the woman and the viewer. Hanging behind the woman—caught in an amorphous cloud of color—is a shadowy monkey, whose extended arm, like the disjointed arm in the Alice series, holds a diamond. Floating around the girl are several enormous diamonds—sharply faceted—all radiating rays of light. New Orleans art critic Eric Bookhardt identifies the monkey figure as Hindu deity Hanuman. He interprets this conjunction of Hanuman and the diamonds as the distortion of the selfless service into “devotion...toward all that glitters” and sees the implied movement of the central figure as the “dance of maya” or illusion (“Otherworldly Operas,” *Gambit Weekly*, August 3, 2003). It is hard, however, to attribute desire, volition, or force of movement to the painting at all, because all of the figures and images seem to float in

a misty realm. Both spiritual detachment and material attachment seem rejected as the woman's face remains absorbed in its own reflection. Her left hand clenches the mirror's handle, while her right arm and empty, open palm trail behind her. As art critic and historian Whitney Chadwick reveals in *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, “the continuing use of the mirror as a tool for the artist affirmed the duality of being, the self as observer and observed. She asserts that Simone de Beauvoir “holds up the image of the mirror as the key to the feminine condition.” Certainly, throughout this show, play with eyes and mirrors challenges the viewers' conception of female vision(s) and reflection(s), but these paintings move beyond the depiction of an isolated female artist or the objectified female form to suggest a desolation of all community and meaning.

The repeated use of carnival lights, stage equipment, and theatrical props is an important element in Muennig's show. If the world itself has been a stage since Shakespeare's time, then Muennig's show suggests that in the twenty-first century, the unconscious itself is also a familiar and well-worn playground. Conflicting images of artifice and enlightenment, distraction and detachment, amusement and understanding vie for space and the viewer's attention.

Icons and allusions rush together like a Rorschach test gone crazy. One piece is entitled *London Bridge is Falling Down*. Another, *The Sky is Falling*, recalls Chicken Little, but is dominated by an Oz-like tornado filled with the impassive face of a woman—the Goodwitch Glenda or the evil queen of Sleeping Beauty—who gazes back at the viewer. Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty are alluded to in many pictures, especially in the seven-piece set entitled “Desire for Diamond Land,” displayed on the second floor.

The long pointed noses of shadowing background figures and one of the two main figures in *A Reflection on Impending Madness* evoke the figure of Pinocchio. In this piece, a tale of another miscreant youth, Peter Pan, is alluded to by the harnessed and hanging crocodile in the background of the piece behind the two humanoid

figures. The impossibility of the title and the idea of madness (lost marbles) recall Neverland (how can the future be reflected now?), which presides over the painting as a dark, autonomous mountain looming to the left, but refusing perspective by occupying both fore- and mid-ground.

Muennig's work adheres to the surrealist mantra that symbolic figuration is a way of unlocking the working of the mind. Her drawings and paintings recall the movement's intellectual expressions: the automatism of Miro and the illusionism of Magritte; and her spatial dislocations, like that of earlier surrealists, approximate the structures and sequences of dreams that both reflect and deflect their underlying emotions.

As with the earlier Surrealists, Muennig's paintings offer disparate elements and dream-sequences. With shadows and shading muting the canvas, many pieces look as if a dream, or the unconscious, itself, has been spilled out on them. Decapitated heads, and unattached arms appear and reappear in several of the pieces. Talismans and mystical elements such as the magic, all-seeing eye, tarot cards, and the Buddha also recur throughout the works. Unlike the art of earlier Surrealists, however, many of these pieces rely on and parlay prefabricated, already-canned and overly-circulated images. They directly refer to and recall fairy tales, children's rhymes, and carnivals. Jack-in-the-boxes and clowns pop up and fall down. There is an entire sequence on Alice, in which the white rabbit appears as an image inside or at the edge of several pieces, serving almost as a frame. The pastiche of circus, carnival, and storybook images is simultaneously endearing, tedious, and frightening. The viewer must acknowledge or appreciate the cacophony of these disjunctions. Such layered pastiche cannot be ignored. Like Pinocchio on Pleasure Island, a child at the circus, or an adult at a carnival arcade, the viewer faces a smorgasbord of choice and a sensory overload.

The influence of Leonora Carrington and Frida Kahlo can be felt through Muennig's repeated representation of dress forms—many

replacing the human form completely—but this is a markedly cynical materialist feminist surrealism that follows, not only Kahlo and Carrington, but also Marilyn Monroe, *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*, and *Moulin Rouge*. Diamonds, many of the paintings suggest, may be a girl's best friend. Diamonds, the same paintings suggest, may just be another distraction.

While Muennig's multivalent use of form as exterior shape or structure, as mode or procedure, and as an essence, recalls the autobiographical portraits of Frida Kahlo, many of the precipices, fissures, and sharp angles of Muennig's canvasses are reminiscent of what Whitney Chadwick calls the "psychic aridity" in Kay Sage's landscapes. Muennig's work is almost devoid of human habitation as stock figures and carnival creatures replace the symbols that many earlier Surrealists drew from their personal realities and from nature. Muennig's brooding atmospheres also seem to recall Sage's sense of impending doom.

Muennig's ability to draw has been questioned by New Orleans' critic Doug MacCash who compares her drawing to Bob Dylan's singing. (*The Times-Picayune*, "Muennig Makes Surreal Style Personal," September 26, 2003). However, drawing ability was not really the forte nor the interest of last century's Surrealist set either. Muennig's strengths lie in her palettes, sticky, antiqued yellows and thick blue-greens, and in her play with perspective. The world(s) of the mind—both artist's and viewer's—are trapped in self-referential canvases that become snow-globes of thought. Although perspective is played with in most of the works, tension is created by their refusal to allow real depth. They deny both spatial and chronological movement, as the images seem to float in fluid matter that might well be the mind. More than depth and perspective, the paintings seem obsessed with shape-shifting and tonal variance. The show's exploration of the impossibility of perspective is both technical exercise and thematic point.

Like her strengths, Muennig's only weakness also seems to be that inherent in the earlier Surrealists. Despite its focus on interiority and its emphasis on the unconscious, much Surrealist work remains intellectual and somewhat sterile. Perhaps that flaw is inherent in Surrealism's attempt to harness and portray the unportrayable. Isn't some sort of pretense inescapably implied in attempting to obviate the unknown? Perhaps that is Muennig's point. Perhaps the sterility and detachment in her work depicts, even more insidiously, the lack of feeling and emotion as post-structuralist art and postmodernist life and culture—even psychology—rehash and reconfigure already over-used images and ideas in their pastiche.

Muennig, may, in fact, take this very issue into account in her showing of impossible perspectives. In the show's fortieth and last painting, *Mirror, Mirror*, both Alice and Sleeping Beauty's stories are recalled. A mirror, the image that has infiltrated, pervaded (and perhaps even stalked), the show, becomes itself the canvas. It resembles the hand mirror in *Blinding Brilliance* with the stem of the mirror now painted onto the wall. The mirror-turned-canvas has only one image, the all-seeing eye, screened onto it about eye level. Scratches surround it. The capital letters ME are almost all that can be read; only close inspection reveals that the eye may again be framed by the fragment from the very first piece in the show, *The Other Side of Heaven: xtreme xtion*. This last piece poses several hard questions. What is the nature of attraction? What is the purpose of reflection? Natalie Merchant's lyrics echo throughout the show, stumbling here on the implicit narcissism of the piece: "Have I been hypnotized, mesmerized, by what my eyes have found? What they have seen?"

The show offers glib replies but no answers. What have our eyes found? What have we seen? The art of Muennig is a postmodern

surrealism of competing icons and images and of surfaces converging and shifting into one another. The suggestion of psychic emptiness pervades the canvases. Sight, now less than ever, offers vision. Insight is impossible. Muennig's final eye, still rolling coyly up to the left, avoids its audience, leaving the viewer (lonely) with her own reflection(s).

A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates

Blake Bailey

Picador, 2003

Reviewed by Mark Lane

Blake Bailey would seem to have chosen exactly the right title—*A Tragic Honesty*—for a book about Richard Yates. The idea, as reprinted in Bailey's epigraph, comes from *Middlemarch*: "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence." Observe a human life closely enough, Yates's stories and novels seem to tell us, and you cannot help but be shattered. There is tragedy everywhere. It is ordinary.

Few realistic writers have put together a body of work so exclusively attuned to human weakness and delusion as Yates's, so oblivious to the customary pieties of character-construction. His characters often have resources of intellect, beauty, or both, but they are ordinary in that they never have any quality that allows them to rise definitively above the common lot of us. They cultivate pretensions that allow them to *think* they can transcend the ordinary, but their pretensions aren't terribly ambitious, and we aren't meant to believe in them anyway. We don't even root for these characters, really. And yet, at least when Yates is at his best, we love them, because their frailty, their limitation, even their pretensions—no matter how much it pains us to admit it—are ours.

Such a philosophical position is risky. Not only does it go against one of the sanest reasons for reading fiction—to transcend one's own narrow experience by occupying, for a time, the minds of

more vital people—it cannot but upset most of us in an elemental way. Who wants to believe that our lives are, with no meaningful exceptions, sad and mediocre?

Those who take exception to Yates's ground rules don't tend to quibble; they tend to have no use at all for his work. Roger Angell, long-time fiction editor for *The New Yorker*, was not simply left cold by the stories Yates's agent sent him. (One of Yates's abiding ambitions was to publish in *The New Yorker*.) As Bailey tells it, the later submissions seem to have increasingly angered Angell, until finally he sent a rejection letter more or less suggesting that the magazine would never publish Yates.

Reviews of Yates's books, too, ranged from negative to mixed, no matter that many of the country's best writers championed his work. Even *Revolutionary Road*, his first and best novel, recognized immediately by many as a big, bleak, chiseled masterpiece deserving of classic status—it was nominated for the 1962 National Book Award, but lost to *The Moviegoer*—got mixed reviews and sold poorly, considering the marketing push and the riot of advance acclaim its publishers justifiably cooked up. The book has been in and out of print ever since, and Yates's other eight books—two story collections and six novels—have fared generally worse. Several are still out of print today.

The standard anti-Yates line, during his lifetime, was some variation on the following: he was inarguably gifted; his stories and books approached stylistic perfection; but his excessively grim view of life made for too much detachment, uninteresting and/or unsympathetic characters, a feeling of grinding fatalism. At times critics even tried to argue that Yates's stylistic mastery was itself a flaw, that character development and narrative possibility were somehow undercut by the demands of his absolute technical precision. His one-time friend Anatole Broyard—a failed fiction writer turned *New York Times* critic—argued essentially this when, under the

guise of reviewing a late, lesser novel, he attempted a wholesale demolition of Yates's reputation. Yates's own daughter Monica—a real-life model, it turns out, for Elaine Benes of *Seinfeld*—though mostly an admirer of her father's work, took him to task at least once in this regard: “All this bleakness is just *bunk*, Dad! Life isn't that bad!”

There is now, however, a movement afoot to install Yates in the pantheon of American letters. (The vacant space is down the hall from Fitzgerald's place, a floor up from Carver's.) In 2000, Vintage reissued *Revolutionary Road*, with an introduction by Richard Ford, and in 2002, Henry Holt published *The Collected Stories of Richard Yates*, with an introduction by Richard Russo. Even *The New Yorker* has recanted, after a fashion: in 2002, the magazine published an early story that Yates never even bothered to collect in his lifetime, much weaker than the rich, novella-length beauties Angell fastidiously denounced. This summer's release of *A Tragic Honesty*, the first full Yates biography, would seem to make it official: the revival is on. For decades Yates has been, in Ford's words, “a cultish standard among writers,” and the publishing industry seems to think the rest of the world is ready for him now.

Hopefully, this will be the case. Maybe distance in time will allow a new generation of readers enough detachment to appreciate or even enjoy the consummate craftsmanship, the wit, the unblinking stare Yates fixed on the America of his own time. (Make no mistake: the books are bleak, but they are also deft, funny, beautifully made things.) *Revolutionary Road* has been compared to *The Great Gatsby*—Yates's favorite book—and it can bear the comparison's weight not least because it is equally adept at weaving its luminously detailed individual tragedy into the fabric of the larger American moment. If you want to read about 1950s suburbia not just to laugh at the emptiness or to feel comforted in your superiority, but to experience the particularity of the moment at the same time that you feel the heartbreak at the phenomenon's core—a

heartbreak upon whose effects the current culture is assuredly built—you must read *Revolutionary Road*. It feels essential in a way that Updike and Cheever only occasionally do.

As for the life Yates lived outside of the publishing and critical worlds, it ended in 1992, and it was “that bad”—only it was not his “tragic honesty” that made it so. It was his unhappy childhood, his tuberculosis, his bad marriage, his alcoholism, his manic depression, his second bad marriage, his emphysema. (At the end of his life, he continued to smoke four packs a day while on oxygen. Graduate students at the University of Alabama, where he spent the last few years of his life, too broke to leave, feared that he would literally blow himself up.) Yates's suffering certainly influenced both the scope and the subject matter of his art, and the chief virtue of Bailey's biography is that it skillfully illuminates the relationship between the life and the work without romanticizing it.

Indeed, Bailey leaves no doubt that Yates was uncommonly prone to misery regardless of the demands of his writing, and he has this on good authority: he seems to have interviewed everyone still living who knew the writer either casually or intimately, including Yates's first wife Sheila, who has otherwise maintained an all-but-absolute silence on the subject of her marriage for going on thirty years. One acquaintance speaks most succinctly for everyone who watched Yates struggle to keep his life together over the years: “He didn't have much of a knack for living.”

Though Bailey is a meticulous biographer, he is not always a principled one. On the subject of Yates's early years, especially, he is far too willing to use the fiction as a source for the biography. He convincingly demonstrates the extent to which Yates used material from his own life in his work, and he generally admits that he is offering no more than a credible interpretation when he speculates about the reality behind fictional scenes, but since when is it acceptable to offer a dramatized, fictional episode as the *only* potential answer to the question of what happened at a given moment in an

author's real life? Isn't the point of literary biography to tell us what we *cannot* know based on the work? After reading several too many statements like, "perhaps their one attempt to bond was very like the abortive driving lesson Evan gives Phil in the book," I couldn't help feeling offended on Yates's behalf. Bailey is, in these moments, reading the author's work in one of the least creative ways possible, ignoring the tremendous efforts of shaping and invention that went into even the most autobiographical of Yates's fiction—efforts that Bailey himself documents elsewhere, of course—and, worst of all, elevating common gossip assumption to the level of scholarly discourse.

But we nevertheless get a good sense of those early years. After an unhappy childhood spent mostly in Greenwich Village, Yates went to boarding school on scholarship, then graduated into the Army at the tail end of World War II. Back home, he skipped college, married, and worked at various writing jobs in Manhattan. His big break, in Bailey's view, came when he found out he had tuberculosis: he was able to spend eight months reading, and then the VA set him up with five years of monthly pension for "service-connected disability."

He and his wife moved to Paris, then Cannes, then London; during this time, Yates wrote his first good stories. Then, as his marriage broke up—it had been threatening to almost from the start—he moved back to New York to write his novel. While writing *Revolutionary Road*, he became a bottle-a-day whiskey drinker. After five years of work on the book, after close to fifteen years of starving-artist obscurity, he suddenly found himself ranked, at least by some, among the country's finest writers.

Bailey's sources understandably multiply once he has guided us this far, and the result is a detailed portrait of alcoholism, madness, loneliness, and squalor. This may sound strikingly like every other prominent twentieth-century male writer's life, but be advised:

Yates's was almost all hangover, with very little fizz or romance on the front end.

For the most part the long descent from middle age to death makes for painful reading, though there are episodes that emit a kind of legendary glow. Yates never made copies of his manuscripts, which caused problems on those occasions when he accidentally set fire to his apartments. (He did so twice, it seems.) The first time this happened, his publisher sent a mutual acquaintance, "a former intelligence operative in Southeast Asia," to rescue the then-current manuscript. The man found a charred square of what had once been paper, and through a series of operations involving glycerin, acetate, and a Xerox machine, managed to reproduce the manuscript. Thanks to this man's efforts, we now have access to *A Good School*, one of Yates's better novels. Less happily, Yates's face was badly burned, so that he had to wear a beard thereafter, for the rest of his life, and his tubercular lungs were further damaged. A week after being released from the hospital, he had a psychotic episode that landed him in another hospital.

The vignette, sadly, is characteristic of the life as a whole. Yates had a few high-profile jobs—speechwriter for Robert Kennedy, screenwriter for John Frankenheimer, teacher at the Iowa Writers' Workshop—and he was married again for a few years, but most of the time his daily life seems to have consisted of shaking off a hangover, writing, and then getting drunk alone, for as many months as possible before he had a mental breakdown. (He had his first breakdown just after finishing *Revolutionary Road*, and then they came regularly for the rest of his life.) Between the drinking, the violent raving of the psychotic episodes, and the overwhelming bachelor's seediness he cultivated even in the best of times, Yates managed to alienate all but a few dedicated friends.

That he remained able to write at all testifies to his enormous dedication; that the work was consistently so good seems simply a

miracle. Though he never wrote another *Revolutionary Road*, Yates produced short fiction that showed him capable of nuanced, traditionally structured short drama—his first collection has been compared to *Dubliners*—as well as a freer, poetic, more associative kind of story that looks backward to Chekhov and forward to Alice Munro. (The stories have been compiled, together with another collection's worth of accomplished, if slightly less interesting early stories, in *The Collected Stories*.) And he wrote two near-perfect, gorgeously sad, small novels: *The Easter Parade* and *A Good School*. These are the highlights; as Bailey affirms, Yates did not publish a bad book.

It is tempting to read *A Tragic Honesty* as a cautionary tale. The admonition would go something like this: *Beware, young writers; this is the price you must pay*. But Yates, with his heartbreakingly acute view of human life, would almost certainly rail against any attempt to derive pithy lessons from his suffering.

One imagines him saying that he was good at some things in life, and bad at others. His life might have worked out better if he had gotten a few more breaks. But the world seldom meets us on our terms. This is the tragedy, and it is the same for everyone.

Yates's way of getting through it was to create an imaginary world that evokes the beautifully despairing logic of this knowledge.

Sofia's Saints

Diana López

Tempe, AZ: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 2003

Reviewed by Jeff Chan

In Mark Leyner's book *Et Tu, Babe*, our narrator and superhero author Mark Leyner reveals the true intentions behind the writing workshops he deigns to preside over now and again: to identify and neutralize any potential writing talent that may, someday, dwarf his own. This is done through spying on workshop participants, kidnapping any talented hopefuls, and subjecting them to weeks of intense interrogation and re-education intended to persuade these writers to never write again. There is, as he says, only so much bookshelf space available, after all, and only so many column inches dedicated to book reviews.

Diana López's first novel, *Sofia's Saints*, is absolutely nothing like Leyner's book. The reason I bring his book up in the first place is because I was writing a rather terrible paper on it at the time I met López, a fellow student in a Southwest Texas State University graduate fiction workshop, lo about six years ago. And, had I a more nefarious streak in me—and the appropriate, Leynerian resources—I would have seen to it that she never, ever wrote another word again.

Sofia's Saints is the story of Sofia Loren Saucedo, a thirty-year-old woman living in Corpus Christi, Texas. Sofia, who is the narrator, dwells somewhere in between a mystical world of art and signs and visions, where God and magic move at oblique angles, to a harsher world of bank loans and television sets and friendships that are more complicated than they seem.

Grounded in this world of the real but always seeking to uncover the wondrous, Sofia works as a waitress at a local Mexican restaurant run by the jolly Pete and his wife Chimuelita, who act as her surrogate parents; Sofia's mother was killed in a car crash years earlier, and she never knew her father. Sofia is also an artist, guiding

pyroelectric pens over wood in order to reveal the hidden saints that have been there all along; as Michelangelo freed his *David* from the marble, so she traces religious imagery that already exists in the chunks of raw wood, which is her chosen medium because they, unlike paper or canvas, "refuse to be framed." For Sofia, it is all a matter of recognizing the sublime beneath the crude material world, and finding ways to reconcile the two. On weekends, Sofia joins her best friend Susie at the flea market, where she sells her woodburnings amidst the kitschy religious trinkets Susie hawks.

Thus is Sofia's life, a personalized portrait of working poor Tejana culture, balanced between economic stability and collapse, between the traditions of her forebears and the emerging American twenty-first century. Into this balance comes the unforeseen x-factor: Mr Vela, Sofia's landlord, has decided to sell the house in order to buy an RV and travel to "see what America's all about" by driving "a mythic journey across the country like a contemporary Odysseus defeating the virtual beasts of America's theme parks." Shocked at the sell-out and disheartened that such a thing could happen, the house having been her only residence, Sofia must finally grow up and learn to stop waiting for the *deus ex machina* she has been hoping for to save her and give her life meaning.

This is a strong first novel with much to admire. I am pleased to report that the striking imagery and uniqueness of Sofia's artistry, rendered with López's sensitive and capable touch, remains intact from the early drafts I poured over in workshop. Sofia's woodburnings depict "St Lucifer stand[ing] in the oil refinery flames that stink up the edges of Corpus Christi. Instead of a child on his back, St Christopher carries the Harbor Bridge and the Intercoastal Highway." Other works depict St. Anthony of Padua, the saint of lost things, standing "on a heap at a public landfill, where angels sort through debris and gulls hover above mounds, his face hidden behind a newspaper's large page, it's headline—YOU SEE?—the question mark looming large"; another shows Lazarus "emerging from the dark entrance of an abandoned store, big windowpanes on

either side of him, toppled mannequins and sale signs, a briefcase in his hand, and 'Sold' on a billboard above."

These works of juxtaposing images, of Biblical figures and saints set in dangerous wastelands of contemporary clutter, inform another of the book's central strengths: its tight thematic unity. Everywhere, we see the sacred juxtaposed with the secular and the holy interposed with the profane, sometimes shifting through different contexts: Susie's religious junk at the flea market seems appropriate. But when the two friends visit a weeping Madonna statue in San Antonio, Sofia with the aim of finally, finally encountering firsthand the spirit world, and Susie with dollar signs in her eyes, the "artículos religiosos," although side-by-side with other opportunistic vendors, seem out of place. Likewise, when Susie opens a new shop out in the soulless suburbs, her Virgin Mary t-shirts and St. Francis bookmarks take on a holier glow.

This is a story about art's methods and purpose, as well as a coming of age narrative, and those thematic concerns are likewise carefully deployed. López endows Sofia's two suitors with congruently juxtaposing qualities. On the one hand is Julián, a neighborhood boy of sixteen, who hangs around Sofia bumming snacks and soda and attention. Julián runs with a gang of graffiti artists, and at one point takes Sofia along, where she witnesses their streetlevel rendering of the fallen Tejano music superstar Selena, "half-immersed in Padre Island sand and hardly recognizable... Seagulls stood about with pieces of her in their beaks..." On the other hand is David, a fellow Sofia met in college, a realist, whose consistent interest in her is continually being warded off, partially due to the fact that he is willing to put his artistic gifts to commercial use: we first meet David as he confers with Pete about a painting commissioned for the restaurant, a tall mural of Selena to be worked over an existing mural of *La Virgen*. These two men in her life represent differing artistic urges, as well as the two sides to Sofia's central conflict: her desires to remain unchanged and innocent and connected to a world where magic may work, and her unalterable need to engage

a more down-to-earth reality where she must mature and grow beyond her roots.

If this sounds like blueprint literature by-the-book, with every little allusion and motif in its place, think again. The thematic concerns of the book *do* end up coming off a bit heavy handed, but not by virtue of their presence alone. The problem lies, as it does with so many contemporary literary offerings, with the first person narrator. While not a navel-gazer, López does tend to have Sofia analyze every other little thing, seeking out its meaning and placing its importance in concord with her worldview.

The fact that this is less of a novel, and more of a novella/long story in which we seek character development above all else, may be the culprit. Of course, this trait is central to her character, and it is another example of this book's consistency. But it also diffuses action and pathos at times. Certain moments maintain an intensity, as when Sofia faints in church after witnessing tears falling down La Virgen's face, or when Pete argues terribly with his gay son César after a party, but even these are either too short and sudden, or too distant from Sofia's story. Other moments, such as when Susie demands Sofia's saved earnings out of her "magic" coffee can, are robbed of a considerable portion of potential energy by our narrator's meditations.

Despite this, and a resolution that wraps itself up perhaps a bit too quickly (but not necessarily tidily—the result of a story, I contend, in which the protagonist resists change), this is a fine, an outstanding first effort, a book that, in the same way Mark Leyner's books have been called "cyberpunk without the science fiction," might be called magical realism without the magic. I'm pleased as punch that it's been published, and even admit to a slight sense of pride in my meager contribution to its drafting. There's only one reason why I'll be spying on Diana López: to get in on the ground floor of whatever else she's dreaming up for us.

Pelican Tracks by Elton Glaser

Southern Illinois University Press, 2003

Reviewed by Ed Skoog

More than a homesick moan for New Orleans from a Broad Street ex-pat thirty years lost to Ohio, but also partly a homesick moan, Elton Glaser's fifth full-length collection of poetry looks back, sometimes bewildered, other times poised, at the fast losses of a Northern adulthood, losses made to hurt worse by the persistent memory of a Southern childhood. The footprints of the title, *Pelican Tracks*, belong to the Pelican-state Glaser, trekking back and forth between Louisiana and Akron, Ohio (Akron! Of all places to find beauty!), and beyond, to Alaska, Australia, and the stars, as if to say that, once he left New Orleans, he lost his sense of gravity and could have floated anywhere. In these poems, while the poet's body stands or sits in Ohio locations, and perhaps takes a long mournful walk there, the poet's mind sits in a pew during "Evening Services on North Rampart Street," strolls along the beach in "Grand Isle," and curls into sleep in "Bedtime Legends near Esplanade." Knowing what it means to miss New Orleans, however, for Glaser, has expanded into knowledge of what it means to miss.

In the book's finest poems, such as "Time Zones" (a meditation on the shadow) and "Late Fifties on Front Street" (an *American Graffiti* of lost New Orleans greaserdom), Glaser balances a calm eye against a turbulent ear, as in this fragment from the latter poem—"The mile-high marcelled hair of Little Richard / And the keyboard booms that shook the common decencies / Of Mom and God;" this turbulence of alliteration and consonance, of stressed riffs and fluid trills, engages the whole ear *en route* to the gobstopper vowels lodged inside the speaker's memory of mother and deity.

Such casual gymnastics of sound and sense suggest the possibility of finding intersections between the grown-up craft of poetry and

the sensory impressions of childhood and adolescence, and perhaps to dwell there for a few moments. The clearest intersection appears, not in Louisiana or Akron, but in the wintry drive between the two. In "And Redeye Gravy with Everything," the poet stops at "a crossroads diner" for "...Crankcase coffee only the dead could drink— / An hour of sweet amnesia from the lethal road."

Elsewhere the poet finds the liberating "sweet amnesia" in contemplation of a painting by the Aboriginal artist Johnny Warrangula Tjupurulla, entitled "Pelican Tracks in the Rain Dreaming." In Glaser's ekphrastic Italian sonnet, the octave asks "Why should this painted pattern, born of a stranger South, / Mean so much to me?" The sestet answers (with perhaps the most excellent description of a pelican since Elizabeth Bishop described their "humorous elbowings," except this pelican is not humorous. It is a self-portrait.):

Half-earth, half-water, and the webfoot at home
Wherever it moves, printing itself on the mud shore,
On a world drained by the low tides of appetite
And washed by tears seeking their own level, a saltway
Drawn down from the densities of darkness in an open eye—
Everything sinking, everything rising again in the mind.

Since his books began appearing in the 1980s, beginning with *Relics* (Wesleyan, 1984) Glaser has been well published but under appreciated. His poems are not bombastic or conspicuously experimental: instead they are the kind of poems one hopes survives from one's culture, works of art that show how we lived. Like William Stafford, James Wright, and Ellen Bryant Voigt, Glaser may show the future archeologist who exhumes our era's verse that we weren't all bad, only perhaps a little devilish, yet from time to time our minds could settle down enough to apprehend:

A few simple beautiful things—
When did I ever want more than that?

But this is no bell for meditation,
No pillow for the dreaming head;
It's white, white as cocaine
With its cold clarities.

In the sweat of the bedroom window,
The moon lays down
A chalk outline of my body.

(*"Immaterial Witness"*)

An apt epigraph from Wallace Stevens opens the book's second section: "Looking for what was, where it used to be." One hard lesson Glaser's learned is how memory intensifies missing, that indulgence in the past makes the present sting. Yet what poet has so far been able to stop? Or not loved the sting? In the concluding quatrains of "1945," the poet recalls his own birth:

Cramped in my mother's womb, I might have been
A sailor on a u-boat, listening for the slow approach
Of the last torpedo, the waters trembling around me.
I might have been crouched in a foxhole, as rain rose to my neck.

Could I feel the Axis in my veins, the old Europe
That turned to mud under the boots and the heavy wheels?
What did I know about bodies and burned cathedrals?
I came out bawling, the only human thing to do.

I repeat: *the only human thing to do*. This cry at the sting of birth continues throughout the book, changing into an ironic Christmas

carol in "O Holy Night," into the "cold cacophonies" of "The Worst High School Marching Band in the South," and ultimately becomes refined into the poet's measured voice in "Endsheet," where the last page of a book is described as "...One more false measure to / Avoid the void—a voice / Patched over the static, glazing / The page with its own late name." Like Robert Frost, John Donne, and Ben Jonson, Glaser has stamped his own name into the poem, in the wry yet meaningful echo within "Glazing / the page," as a last cry, a very human thing to do.

CONTRIBUTORS

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JAMES DOYLE's latest manuscript, *Einstein Considers a Sand Dune*, won the 2003 Steel Toe Poetry Book Contest, judged by David Kirby, and will be published in 2004.

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K.E. DUFFIN's work has appeared in *Black Warrior Review*, *Chelsea*, *Harvard Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Partisan Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Rattapallax*, *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Verse*, and other journals. In 2001, she was a finalist for the National Poetry Series, the Walt Whitman Award, and the Colorado Prize. She has had residences at The Millay Colony and Yaddo.

BRUNO FLEMING works as an academic librarian.

PHILIP FRIED's poems, reviews, and essays have appeared in journals, including *Partisan Review*, *Paris Review*, *Tin House*, *Barrow Street*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, and *Ascent*. He has published two books of poetry, *Mutual Trespasses* (Ion, 1988) and *Quantum Genesis* (Zohar, 1997). His third manuscript is entitled *Big Men Speaking to Little Men*.

MEGAN GANNON was born in Tennessee, and received a BA from Vassar College. After two years in the Peace Corps, she received an MFA from the University of Montana. She currently lives in Prescott, Arizona, where she was awarded a 2003 Writer's Fellowship from the Arizona Commission on the Arts.

RANDY GENTRY lives in New Jersey, where he teaches in the English Department at Montclair State University. These are his first published poems.

ALICE GEORGE's work has appeared in such journals as *The Denver Quarterly*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *West Branch*, and *American Literary Review*. Some collaborative work with Cecilia Pinto is forthcoming in *Quarter After Eight's* tenth anniversary issue and Anthology Press. Co-editor of *RHINO*, she lives in Evanston, and teaches workshops for children and adults.

DANIEL GUTSTEIN is an associate editor of *StoryQuarterly*, and lives in Alexandria, Virginia. His book manuscript has been a finalist in several contests including the Bakeless Prize and the Walt Whitman award.

JEFF HARDIN is the author of two chapbooks, *Deep in the Shallows* (GreenTower Press) and *The Slow Hill Out* (Pudding House). He has been nominated for the Pushcart prize several times. His poems appear or are forthcoming in *Rattapallax*, *Sou'wester*, *West Branch*,

Maize, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *The Formalist*, and *Smartish Pace*. (www.columbiastate.edu/jeffhardin)

JAMES KLISE has published stories in *Story Quarterly*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Ascent*, and elsewhere. His nonfiction has appeared in the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *Booklist*. He resides in Chicago.

MARK LANE teaches English at Loyola University, New Orleans. He is working on a novel.

DONA LIEF has a BFA from Newcomb College, and an MFA from Tulane University. She teaches in the Talented in Visual Arts program for the New Orleans Public Schools, and is represented by Marguerite Oestreicher Fine Arts Gallery in New Orleans. Her paintings will be included in an international collection of art on Madonna by Caxton Publishing Group, London. She is the subject of an artist's profile in an upcoming issue of *Juxtapoz* magazine.

ALEX LEMON lives in St Paul, Minnesota, where he's worked as a butcher and a tractor-trailer unloader. His poems have appeared in *Square Lake*, *Blue Collar Review*, *Pig Iron Malt*, among others, and are forthcoming in *The Butcher Shop*, *Sonora Review*, *Octopus Magazine*, *Jabberwock Review*, *CutBank* and *Black Warrior Review*. He's the assistant editor for *LUNA, A Journal of Poetry and Translation*.

SUSAN LEWIS received her MFA in fiction from Sarah Lawrence College, a JD and a BA from UC Berkeley. She will be the featured poet in an upcoming issue of *Sulphur River Literary Review*. Her poetry and fiction has appeared in *CrossConnect*, *Fugue*, *Sycamore Review*, *Phoebe*, *So To Speak*, *Global City Review*, *Quantum Tao*, *The New Press Literary Quarterly*, and in an anthology, *Breaking Up Is Hard To Do*. The Maelstrom Percussion Ensemble recorded her *Speech Quartet* (music by Jonathan Golove), and performs it in the United States and Canada.

DAVID T. MANNING, a California native, lives in Cary, North Carolina. He has won awards from the North Carolina Poetry Society, including its Poet Laureate Award in 1996 and again in 1998. A Pushcart nominee, his poetry has appeared in *Pembroke Magazine*, *Crucible*, *Rattle*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *Free Lunch*, and other journals. His most recent chapbook, *Out After Dark*, was published by Pudding House Press in 2003.

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ANDER MONSON edits New Michigan Press and the online magazine, *DIAGRAM* (<http://thediagram.com>). His poetry manuscript, *Elegies for Descent and Dreams of Weather*, is forthcoming from Tupelo Press, and Sarabande Books will publish *Other Electricities*, his novel-in-stories, in 2005.

SUE OWEN, who is the Poet-in-Residence at Louisiana State University, is the author of four books of poetry, including the forthcoming *The Devil's Cookbook* from LSU Press.

SIMON PERCHIK is an attorney whose poetry has appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, *New Orleans Review* and elsewhere. Readers interested in learning more about him are invited to read *Magic, Illusion and Other Realities* at www.geocities.com/simonthepoet, which site also includes a complete bibliography.

ALLISON PETIT, a native of Montréal, Canada, relocated to southern United States to study at Louisiana State University where she received an MFA in Studio Art in 1993. In 2002, she received a grant from the Canada Council for a project entitled *South Louisiana Soul: Deciphering Personal Altars Through Pinhole Photography*. The photographs published here are part of that project. Her work has been exhibited in New Orleans, St Louis, and Lyon, France, and will be exhibited in 2004 at the Toyahashi Museum in Toyahashi, Japan.

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AMY SCATTERGOOD's poetry has been published in *The Paris Review*, *Grand Street*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and others. Her first collection, *The Grammar of Nails*, was published in 2001. She lives in Iowa City, Iowa, with her family.

ANIS SHIVANI has just finished a novel on art conservation. His other novel, awaiting publication, fictionalizes the culture wars in the postmodern academy. His fiction, criticism, and poetry have appeared in *The Café Review*, *Chiron Review*, *Quarter After Eight*, and *Northwest Florida Review*. His journalism has appeared in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *New York Press*, *New Politics*, and *Adbusters*.
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MYRNA STONE's poems have recently appeared in *Barrow Street*, *Nimrod*, *River Styx*, *Black Warrior Review*, and *Quarterly West*, and in three anthologies. She is the recipient of two Fellowships from the Ohio Arts Council, and a Full Fellowship from the Vermont Studio Center. Her first collection, *The Art of Loss*, was released by Michigan State University Press in 2001.

CHRISTOPHER TOROCKIO is the author of the story collection *Presence* (St Andrews College Press), and recent fiction appearing in *The Iowa Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Northwest Review*, *Passages North*, and *Sou'wester*. He teaches at Eastern Connecticut State University.

MILTON O'NEAL WALSH, JR, born and raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is currently writing in the MFA program at Ole Miss. He has been published in *The Absinthe Literary Review*, anthologized in *French Quarter Fiction*, and awarded the John C. Hodges Prize for Excellence in Graduate Fiction. He is working on a novel, and engaged to be married.

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DEITER WESLOWSKI lives in a fourth-floor walk-up in Malden, Massachusetts. Thus far he has not won the lottery (a kind of solution for the poverty in his life). Still, the seduction of light and color keeps and feeds him.

THEODORE WOROZBYT is the recipient of grants from the NEA, the Georgia Council for the Arts, and the Alabama Council on the Arts. His work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Elixir*, *Green Mountains Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *New England Review*, *The North American Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry Daily*, *Smartish Pace*, *Spinning Jenny* and *Third Coast*.

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