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Front and back cover photographs: Anthony Wood
Tonto’s Expanding Headband

What rooms lifted up and what forms of pure
maintenance keeps the engines of North Bergen
rising? Manhattan is a cracked curtain
& it’s breath-rubbed glass pylons are fixed into
the bedrock. The people I passed were whistling between
random scowls and at the fringe of the lake, a flap
of thunder was the slow flame on a limper.

I was only the same town from day to day
& was soon among the voice of my failures inside
the cracked formica pizzeria. And I heard my
fortune cookie fate announced in that cell
of late and brutal money. And this is what
I write out of: a walking life.
In Weeds

—for D L M.

In the long summer grass
of our yard,
mother bends over me,
tells me to be good.
As she moves away,
my father, her cruel pet,
leans against an elm tree
and watches, nodding.

Above us,
a swallow
sheds her leafy branch
like a cloak,
flies from sight.

Where we lie
hidden in weeds
my father’s hands
begin again.
Giraffe

dream-acrobats,
above it all but not
aloof, gainly, living geometry
they move in unison, legs and necks
through a slow motion backdrop
of golden veldt grass
to curl their tongues around
succulent leaf. Sleepwalkers,
their camouflage
useless but beautiful.
The Territory

Masked men on scaffolds
sandblast rust from the watertower
and black grit rains
like the plague, bombarding
the paint-jobs of city-owned pickups,
bouncing like worn bearings
off tobacco-spit sidewalks
as Mr. J. R. Hendricks,
Water-Department Crew Chief,
rushes around screaming
for everybody to protect things
and the unfurled tarpaulin
of another early morning screw-up
flaps in the oncoming storm.

I'm here trying to sell water-meters
to Hendricks again, a crap job
I've held for nearly a year,
months spent circling a small,
protected territory carved
from the unspeakable failures
of former salesmen. Commissioned sales
to small Southern towns that I visit
in a Volkswagon with no radio and bad brakes, driving and drinking,
absorbing my own expenses,
until I can hear myself singing
in the rush of the road wind
and the thump of my tires turning.
This Wawa is out of applications.

Truly into overness
to equalize the murk becoming stuck in souls

alter egos adopt the dress you’ve rejected for its too low neckline. Which end of the difference
sucked into the great vacuum
of death would receive the loudest
applauds from the moral majority,
the moose on your backwards banana.

"I dreamt of frozen popsicles shaped like guns."

In the space between the furnace and the hot water heater
I thought there was a mirror for cynical aphorisms
capitalized by a deli sandwich
or the tuba's tugboat bottoming out for the band

    belting out a 3/4 automaton flash
    gummed broadside in order to brutishly feed on its self
    contrived
    initiation which is dimming us to death.

"He thought F's looked like little fallopian tubes—flock flock flock."

So on this headache tour
only the shadow of the piano stool is a Mondrian disguised as
a paisley in a psychedelic shop.

Smooch goes the sandwich
negotiating the very idea
that the pedestal had nothing to fuck with
while the bonanza ranch hands have gone supercritical.

    "You comb our hair with weeds."
Trails of lust rebuilding
a contingent cantata that the patronizing night
(people who drive by like they’re trying to kill you.)
attempts to bed down in a bubbles burst universe
trapped inside of an android

marble cake    repeating decimal
salted by the cold groan you arm
gone straight from sales to sanitation.

“I’m somewhere in the remains of ergo-matic decay.”

The oven understudy
has an evangelistic expalidocious shoe-string-crabwork,
but dinner at the “old swimming pool”
doesn’t get my iron on an airplane
to the prince’s phony palace.
You can desire braless if you want but
you can’t erase the possibility of one.
Я сплю в твоем свитере потому что одной - не спится. Там-то, в Питере, только и помыслов, влюбиться, а в Москве дела, эхон в ушах, купала горят, разве есть время? Нет времени, говорят. Все происходит попеременно по пять секунд сочных в паденье, и ты, подперев их вдруг как конечный в том направленьи пункт, населенный мною так густо, что все вокруг пустое пространство брука -- курортный юг, -- закрываешь стеной, водопадом, рюм мой открытый рот, умывальник, дом. Мне б рассказать, как не нужен бывает йод тому кто в полете сбит и в крови поет, но я рвлюсь в стопки и йод и кровь, повесть сжимая в скобки фигуры ямбы, и на поли не пяшие с пальцем гвозди -- парашютные кольца, какое не дернешь -- везде морковь.
(untitled)

I sleep in your sweater. To keep drinking down.
Over in Petersburg, all they can think about
is falling in love, but back here in Moscow
there’s work to be done, my ears ring, domes glimmer.
Do we have enough time? They say there’s no time.
Everything happens in five-second pulses
succulent and ripe—you snapped them up
like final precisely prescribed punctuation,
but here it’s so crowded with me, all around
everything’s Brook’s Empty Space—Coney Island.
You encompass my open mouth, wash-basin, home
with a wall, waterfall, moat and trench.
I could talk about iodine no longer needed
for the downed aviator who sings in my blood.
I pour it out iodine and blood in a shot-glass,
a tale squeezed into brackets iambic figurines
with no marginal guava dropping off palms—
parachute rings—let them go—carrot bombs.

Translated by J. Kates
Shadow Box

From inside the house the feature resembled a kind of alcove recessed into space, a three-sided miniature room overhanging the street, sterile and radiant from its triptych of tall narrow windows, and from outside an addition cleverly camouflaged by its dimensionally replicative relationship to the Greek-columned porch on which it stood, but to them, the milky rain of light it framed possessed an undiscovered purpose, a place to explore. The trilateral sets of venetian blinds, not quite drawn so as to illume the umber carpet with radially hatched lines of lemon sunlight, hung with enlarged and enveloping proportions, as if within a dollhouse. The projected niche had immediately enchanted him: while touring one of the four apartments in the house, its ethereal and serene glow had drawn him from the group, and when he stepped into its shallow standing space, he felt a kinetic energy surround him, close and buzzing and, if he were to guess, somehow cleansing.

“What a cute little room,” his wife had declared, leading the others toward him, to prevent disapproval of his mysterious departure. Later that night, he returned to the protruding space finding spokes of moonlight. Again he sensed the same tumid pressure, the kind in a closed cold car. Through the blinds on the side window forming a right angle with the frontal window in his efficiency, he noticed he could see his wife inside the apartment, and as he watched her switch a rocker and coffee table, tirelessly sizing the room, he felt from his suspended outward angle a detached mood gripping him, a feeling of isolation from seeing Anne without him, within another compartment of the house. Stepping back, he glanced up and down the dark street, the view striped with luminous blinds, and in his insular booth above the earth, he suddenly became aware of himself as a frail and single person.

“Honey, what do you think of the little room,” he had poised to her a week or so later, when the newness of the historic Greek Revival house had settled comfortably—when they had mastered with their wrists and fingers the rhythmic technique to unsticking its locks; when they had discovered how to glide
silently along its dim hallways, under a thunderous white-trim archway and up a spiraling oak bannister, missing noisy treads and floorboards muffled in places by carpet; and when they had territorialized every dimension of their apartment, scenting and soiling the bathroom and kitchen with numerous melting soaps and towels draped over radiators, filling the corners of the living room with musty teddy bears or Formica tables or potted plants, and dressing ledges and shelves with potpourri baskets, soap tins, and colored stones found during walks along the inlet.

She had been propping postcards of Maxfield Parrish paintings along the mantle when his question interrupted her, and when she turned she knocked a few off the ledge. “There’s a ghost living in there,” she announced.

The word ghost struck him not as a literal embodiment but as a verification of the tingling sensation he had experienced whenever standing in the space; the close walls and therefore inordinately pressurized air, together with the illusion of hovering over the street, electrified and exalted the space, a place much like a scenic overlook, although vacant and private.

Neither the landlady downstairs nor the tenant across the hall had showed any interest in the miniature room (the tenant downstairs they had seen only a few times), so the unclaimed appeal of the alcove, along with the bare yellow walls funneling them forward, had abducted his capacity to consider or to tolerate the space as communal or violable. He felt there as he had as a boy when, visiting the empty and unlocked Romanesque church on his street in the evenings, he would sit in the confessional, letting the immediate darkness soothe him, itself absolve him. Her claim, whether irrational, provoked him to suspect a paranormal invasion, some kind of a supernatural trespassing.

“Really...ghosts?” he had inquired more than once.

“No, just one,” she corrected.

He had known her to make these kinds of absurd remarks: once, she claimed that, in a former life, she had been Lord Byron’s lover; another time, she insisted she had seen her exact
portrait in the National Gallery of Art somewhere amid a
series of retrospectives of Flemish renaissance painters, though
the painted face staring serenely at hers, as if reflected from a
mirror textured with tiny cracks, had rattled her so she had
neglected to note the artist; and of late, she decided she would
reincarnate as a butterscotch cat.
“It’s probably the person who owned the house,” she contin-
ued.
During the year, he observed the way she, when either
leaving or entering the apartment, would swivel her head ever
so evenly, like an owl, and, stretching back her eyelids and
squeezing forward large black almonds, would stare down the
hallway into the miniature room, seeing something; her cata-
leptic, zombielike body and her fixed bewitched gaze startled
him, and he snapped, “What!” not sure if his wife—so likely to
exaggerate—really saw the ghost she, to a degree, had actual-
ized by automatically entrancing herself this way whenever in
the hallway. “Honey, what is it,” he would demand, stepping
into her view.
“Nothing,” she would ultimately say. “I thought I saw some-
thing.”
“But what,” he would press, excited, not willing to let her
dismiss whatever she had noticed at the end of the hall.
“I just don’t know,” she would invariably conclude, frustrat-
ing him.
Either she, to fool him, had altogether invented seeing an
apparition, he decided, or she had really detected a distor-
tion—a specter—in the dusty bars of sunlight filtering through
the slanted sets of blinds, which dwarfed the walls of the
shrine-shaped feature so that the space itself appeared more
ornamental than functional, more indulgent and playful than
practical or planned. He never knew whether to believe her.
The reduced proportions of the space had charmed him—the
short pieces of white baseboard, snipped and tucked to fit and
frame a square of carpet the size of card table, along with the
bands of rough weatherboards, in foot-long pieces around the
three windows, rising to a flat paneled ceiling basking with
soaked glow of recent enamel—but he had learned to stay out
of the tiny room: he felt not another presence but his—too strongly—detached from hers, himself again isolated, cold, lifeless, as he had when single.

“Show me what’s there,” he braved saying one evening, almost a year after noticing the curious addition.

Her hands working the keys, tonight she had again glanced down the hall, into the phosphorus bars of moonlight criss-crossing one another on the playhouse-size patch of floor. “Oh Michael, there’s nothing there. You know how Cancers are....”

He had started toward where he had for months avoided, and when he turned to see if she followed, his clinched jaw, distorted in the dim light, told her he insisted. “Show me,” he asked softly. Waiting outside the glowing chamber, he heard her feet helplessly hitting the brittle floorboards, snapping splinters of original wood under the carpet, and when she positioned herself beside him, both of their shoes at the edge of the cast moonlight, he realized he had learned from habit where not to step.

He was preparing himself for the buzzing, for the active energy contained so tightly within the addition, when she, without him, stepped inside, calmly glancing out the windows. Shadows of leaves cast by a streetlight flickered upon her skin. Abandoned, he quickly followed and recognized at once a familiar sensation, a closeness, a unity, unlike what had occurred here without her—not isolation, but companionship, like that of figurines holding hands—for immediately he and she had scrunched together, shoulder touching shoulder, and the warmth passing through their pressed flesh reminded him of when they had stood so nervously at the altar of his childhood church, marrying. The watchful pews of relatives fanning behind them, into a soft June light, had enshrined their jittery breaths; he had seen colorful eel-shaped trails of tension swimming between and around them, encircling their heads and bodies, empowering them with the will to vow. He shifted closer and clinched her hand, interlocking a few fingers, as a kind of temporary and precarious bond to hold until either chose to regrip.

“It’s just us,” he heard her say.
Planks and Boards

Each year the large woody stems extend further upward into the air and down into the soil—

a young maple unexpectedly violated by lightning, an oak in the center of a scrapbook, flat and waxed,

an old elm, difficult to split, perfect (trees all around) for a bridge or a shadow

Green blades of heaven and backyard flowers, a line of dancing women, fe-mina, less faith,

woman of the crooked branch, undesirable for shade, more or less divided from man by an ellipsis

or a reflection in a mudpuddle. A house. A chair. The rude outline of Marguerite undressing.
A beautiful bush. Rockaby baby on the treetop. 
A bush is something a human can hide behind

A tree can be climbed for an advantage, 
a hunted animal in the uppermost branches, 

stout and prolific. The odor of a man’s shirt. 
Of no significance from the standpoint of lumber.
Treblinka

like the sound
of thick giraffe
long necks
shattering
trembling
crystal bullets
I was wrapped
in a blue so
torn and old
it was almost
colorless blue
of David's eyes
and the light
we could see from
trains. I had
enough of moon
light, hiding
slithering between
barns. Under the
hay my heart was
pounding. Maybe
when they shave
it it will go
for a mattress
in Berlin, that
head I'll never
spit at dreamed
of goose fat
sputtering on
as he washed his
thick course beard
with the soap of
a sister you
won't know. If
Treblinka was a
color it would
be a hard icy
almost white
blue the color
of the flames
they shoved
cribs into. What
shatters becomes
its own blade
Light in January

it begins with
those lights strung
over Main Street
in snow flittering
on the blimps of
Chevys and Fords
In back of the
lilac room the
last sun's
gulped quava
and apricot church
spires cut there
was too much pain
a woman wrote in a
diary in hand
writing she
can't recognize
as a daughter
watches tangerine
light her head
against glass
to stop throbbing
as rooms she'll
have to clean
out if she still
can go from
lavender and lilac
as spray from the
falls that would
lull fights gnaws
at bricks so
what holds up
is threatened
Power

1.
I was thirsty all day, sucking a paper cut
in the dusty web between my fingers, mylar
bubbling on the window, Central Park
thickening in the distance. All day
I remained in my allotted space,
received fluttering sacrifices of paper.
Morning had opened with the televised
drama of weather, a pinwheel hurling light
across a map of the United States,
that familiar, generous saddle.
Air masses accounted for, I traveled
under land and water, shuffled into
a marble elevator and thought of Jesus
in Herod’s slick palace, lonely
for the wasps of his childhood,
the leathery eggs of lizards,
holes appearing in flat-iron blocks
of ripening cheese. If I had been God,
my ear pressed to the earth’s expanding
belly, I would have heard vessels
being beaten from gold, and the cracking
of skulls in that palace. I would
have heard the storm clustering,
spinning out from its hungry center,
and I would have rescued my only child.
2.
Jesus wept in the garden, moonlight
velvet on his shoulders, tangled hair
in his face, his lips chapped with salt.
He raised his arms to heaven and hoped
for some fatherly, celestial frequency,
but the air was empty. The moon gazed
blankly back at him and he realized
nothing could stop this betrayal,
any more than he could stop the growth,
somewhere, of a rodent’s yellow incisors;
any more than he could circumvent the death
of a foot, strangled in the womb by umbilical
constriction; any more than he could make
this long night part of someone else’s story.
Jesus wept, and prayed for strength,
and was answered with a vision: the calcified,
internal shell of a cuttlefish, gleaming
and perfect. Someday, he knew, a cluster
of piles would be driven into the harbor’s
murky depths, the harbor that was now a desert.
Someday a family would crouch on their hut’s
earthen floor and sip the clouded, clotted water
in which rice had boiled. Someday a city would flex
its glittering spine, as if nothing had happened.
3.
Hand over hand, Peter pulled in the foaming net of fish, his palms burning. His shoulders ached. He still feared the soldiers, their muscles greased, swords swinging in a rhythmic display of boredom, scraping sparks from boulders. Seaweed clutched his ankles, was sucked back with tide. One of the ocean's air-filled bladders bobbed with dull abandon, trailed its lethal, elegant tentacles. A paralyzed fish, eyes pulsing, floated stiffly toward the tiny, flapping mouth. Peter heard women laughing, but no women were near. He tasted vinegar, but his mouth was empty. He saw a figure striding wave to wave, then the figure disappeared. In his pocket, the hairy larvae of a moth rolled and bucked, and Peter shouted at the boiling, purple sky: I have not crushed the fingers of children; I have not stoned the bloody backs of whores; I have not welcomed Satan as a lover. Even though I have been silent, and my silence was an ax, and it fell on the necks of those around me, I deserve a place in heaven.
4. She knows little of the twelve tribes or whose armor was nailed to the trunk of what tree. She sips wine from a pouch and avoids the secretions of insects, however tempted she is by silk, and by the luster of honey. She sleeps outside, away from the others. A dog shakes the gnats from his eyes and whimpers as she unbraids her hair, unrolls her bed beneath a calculating net of stars. She believes their stories, and traces what inhabits there. She believes the earth has a core, one that never thaws, and she feels its chill seeping through the ground, to her pallet. She dreams of fish large as islands, great, slick backs breaking the icy surface. She wakes, the desert breathing down her neck. A white calf shudders; she brushes his slick sides and leads him to temple, pauses past a wooden block where hides are scraped, speaks to a disinterested apprentice: My body is the same, but it is no longer mine. Light pools in her hands like water.
5.
Dazed lambs tripped on their tethers.
A man breathed on his knife blade,
rubbed it clean as a mirror.
A low sun mouthed the caravan.
A boy squatted in shade, tossed
apricot pits and caught them
on the back of his hand.
Invading his circle of vision:
his father's dusty, sandaled feet.
Resounding from some familiar height:
his father's voice commanding him
away from the others; they would
make their sacrifice in private.
The boy folded apricot pits
in cloth, knelt to receive
bundles of wood, staggered
up the dirt path, beyond
the slackening tents,
the twisted trees,
his eyes dilated with effort
as he dropped his burden,
stretched out on the cracked ground,
permitted his father to bind
his wrists, his ankles, raise
the dagger from deep in his robes.

What if their god hadn't softened,
hadn't stopped the father's hand
and sent a ram wrestling in the thicket,
a fine ram fit to grimace in the fire?
For weeks, the boy imitated his father's
weary posture, hovered, dedicated as a moon,
fearing destruction if he came too close.
piss

remember once I was sitting in this hotel
room when my woman came in drunk and said,
“Christ, I couldn’t hold it, I had to piss on the
elevator!”
I was drunk too, I was barefoot and just in
my shorts.
I got up and walked out the door and down
the hall and pushed the elevator
button.
it came up.
the door opened.
the elevator was empty but sure enough
there in the corner was this
puddle.
as I was standing there a man and a
woman came out of their place
and walked toward the
elevator.
the door was beginning to close
so I held it open with my hand
so they could get
on.
as the door began to close I heard the
woman say,
“that man was in his shorts.”
and just as it closed I heard the man say,
“and he pissed on the elevator.”

I went back to the room and told her,
“they think I pissed on the elevator.”

“who?” she asked.

“people.”
"what people?"

"the people who saw me standing in my shorts."

"well, screw them," she said.

she was sitting there drinking a glass of wine.

"take a bath," I said.

"you take a bath," she said.

"at least take a shower," I said.

"you take a shower," she said.

I sat down and poured a glass of wine.

we were always arguing about something.
Five Flying Saucers

Everyone called Fay's Daddy The Old Man. The sign above his head read: JUNK WRECKING SALVAGE. Fay stood, in a corner of the garage, waiting for his answer to a note she'd brought from her Mama. Pushed back up on his head was the green face shield he wore when using the acetylene torch.

The Old Man crumpled up the note from her Mama and dropped it on the steel desktop. He opened the center drawer and picked through a box of tiny torch tips.

Fay lifted her weight onto the balls of her blue sneakers and peered out the narrow pane of glass surrounded by cardboard. It was sunny after a week of rain, although the garage remained dark and close inside. The garage was more like a barn with its dirt floor and single line of electricity. Nothing more than a wood frame so the boys could work inside when the weather was bad.

Fay's brother Bobby pushed through the door. "Gotta guy out there from outta town. Gotta problem with his car—a foreign job." He tossed a radiator hose into a crate near the door. "I know we ain't got nothin' to fix it."

Fay knew foreign jobs were special. She turned toward the window again and caught a glimpse of a cherry red fender.

The Old Man's swivel chair groaned. "Milk'im. At least get'im outta the gate. Let'im worry about it after that." He dropped a torch tip in his shirt pocket and slammed the desk drawer shut.

"You can't do that!" Fay cried out, as she moved toward the door.

"Why you little brat—" Bobby turned on her. "You'd better watch out. That guy doesn't like little girls," he hissed, swatting at her with a grease-caked work glove.

Fay slipped out the door. The light outside blinded her as she ran down the unpaved road, along the corridor of wrecked cars, past the Chevys and Buicks, down to the Fords. She tripped, falling to the ground—a bed of shattered safety glass, brake
lights, and reflectors.

In the distance Bobby shouted and the tow truck roared. In the silence that followed, Fay heard footsteps that brushed the ground easily, not at all like steel-toed boots. Jesus? Fay called out. But, does Jesus whistle? Jesus doesn’t follow, though, Jesus leads.

Dust formed a film on Fay’s tongue. Mama says I’ve got to eat a peck of dirt before I die. Fay pressed her body against the ground. Thank you, Lord, for hair the color of dirt. But I’m gonna get jumped. Her gaze traveled across the ground until she found what she knew had to be there: the shadow. She turned around and saw a man’s feet clad in sandals. Fay snapped her head back around and prayed, loud and fast, an abbreviated version of the Twenty-Third Psalm.

Her body seemed to rise from the ground. Arms and legs dangling, she felt a slight pressure against her chest. Looking down, she saw the cleanest hands she’d ever seen pressed against her. The soles of her feet touched the ground gently. As the pressure against her chest subsided, she spun around, drawing herself up and brushing the dirt off her hands.

“Are you okay?” the man asked, pulling a handkerchief out of his back pocket as he knelt before her.

Fay stepped back. Is he a magician? she wondered.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said, as he gathered the handkerchief in one hand. “I just want to help you.”

So many fingers and hands all over me all the time, Fay thought, as her body shook; knees knock-knocking together. I’m so dirty. She put her hands behind her back and looked down on his head.

His hair was almost blond. Ash Blonde, she guessed, having memorized the color chart in Woolworth’s. Her Mama bought Honey Blonde. But men don’t color their hair. He must be natural. And he’s so clean. His skin was the color of toast or nuts or copper. Copper was always clean, even in the junkyard. Never saw a man so clean before. He must be from God. Only God would send someone so clean to a junkyard. Fay remembered the copper Christmas tree angel. She could never decide if it was a girl or a boy. She looked down, over the man’s crown,
to the very soft sole of his shoe.

The roar of the tow truck cut through the air as Bobby raced by heading for the far end of the lot. Fay looked down at the man, again.

“A penny for your thoughts,” he said, smiling, as he stood up.

Fay watched his hands, biting her bottom lip. A penny buys a flying saucer. He held out a coin. Five flying saucers, she thought. “You weren’t watching, mister,” she said, as she took the nickel. She put it in her pocket. “They could’ve jumped you.”

“What did you say?” he asked, pushing his hair back from his forehead. A small beard, shot through with auburn highlights, wreathed his chin. A light wind picked up the ends of his hair and the sun shone about his head like a corona.

“Are you Our Lord and Savior?” Fay asked.

The man shook out the handkerchief and stuffed it back into his pocket. “I’ve been called a whole lotta things, little lady, but never that.” He smiled and added, “No, I’m just a painter.”

“You paint houses?” she asked.

“No, I’m an artist,” he said, as he bent over and pulled up out of the ground a piece of wire just long enough to trip over. He tested its tension.

Fay moved slowly away from him. She bumped up against the front end of a car, stifling the cry in her throat. She jammed her elbows against the hot metal and rested her foot on the bumper.

The man tossed the wire across the road between a pick-up truck and a sedan. He squatted, picked up a small stick, and poked at the ground. A spark plug popped out, leaving behind a perfectly formed mold. The man picked up the plug and rolled it between his fingers, rubbing off a tiny clump of dirt. His fingernails had the pearly sheen of spark plugs.

“What about you, little girl,” he asked. “Are you some kind of saint?”

“No!” she answered, stamping a foot. “I’m a Methodist. What do you paint pictures of?” she asked.

“I don’t paint anything that would interest a little girl,” he said, shrugging, as he looked off.
Fay remembered what Bobby said about the man not liking little girls. She pushed herself up off the bumper.

“C’mon,” she said, drawing herself up tall. “Tell me what you paint pictures of.”

“Just things.” The man shrugged, again, and stood up.

“I knew you weren’t an artist,” she said, leaning close to look into his eyes. His eyes were hazel and did not meet hers.

“I paint pictures of numbers,” he said, with a shake of his head.

She gasped. “I paint by numbers, too!” she cried.

“See, I knew you wouldn’t understand,” he said, smiling. He headed in the direction of the garage.

Fay circled around in front of him. He wore a knitted pullover shirt with buttons at the neckline. Fay studied the smooth mounds of his chest.

He walked around her.

“Are you a man?” she asked.

He stopped walking and said, “Of course I’m a man.”

Fay’s eyes moved across his backside from hip to hip as if words were printed there. “You have little breasts,” she said. “I thought maybe you were a girl.” She held her breath, hoping he wouldn’t strike her.

“I’m not a girl,” he said.

“Wanna see my breasts?” she asked, as she walked up and stood beside him. She pushed her chest up.

“Little girls shouldn’t talk like that,” he said, looking away.

“I’m not a little girl!” she cried. Just beyond the man she saw the path through the bushes she’d made last week.

The man sighed. “How old are you?”

“Ten,” she answered.

When he was several steps from her, she said, “Tell me why I should live, Mr. Painter.”

The shrill sound of cicadas filled the air.

The man stopped walking and turned around again. “You probably know the answer to that question already.”

Fay looked up at him and frowned.

“Trust yourself.”

Fay held his gaze.
“Because the world is filled with beautiful things to see,” he said, finally.

Fay scanned a row of battered cars: a sky blue dented front end, a fat rusted bumper, a pair of gaping headlights, a maroon front seat upended next to a green burned-out Ford, a stack of mud-caked hubcaps. She looked back at the painter. “Do you mean beautiful things like Christmas?”

He looked at her a moment and then said, “Sure. But you don’t have to wait for Christmas.” He walked over to the upended front seat and ran his hand along its curve. “This is very beautiful, too.”

Fay’s gaze followed the motion of his hand. She stepped closer to him. “Do you believe in God, Mr. Painter?”

He looked away in the direction Bobby had driven.

She leaned closer, nearly brushing his arm. She inhaled deeply, eyes closed. I can’t even smell him, she thought. Only the oil and grease and rubber of the junkyard. Maybe he’s not really here. Daddy says I’m always seeing things that aren’t there. She opened her eyes. But the man is here—and a painter no less!

The cry of a car door creaking open echoed in the stillness.

The painter turned in the direction of the sound.

“It’s The Grease Monkey,” Fay explained.

Bobby dragged past in the tow truck on the way back to the garage and kicked up a fresh cloud of dust. The man slapped at his pants.

“Bobby says you don’t like little girls,” she said.

He stopped slapping at his pants and looked at her, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m not a little girl, though,” she added quickly.

“I know,” said the man, walking away again. “You already said you weren’t little.”

“No! I mean I’m not a girl! I was a little boy, but Bobby cut—”

The man stopped short, raising his arm, and Fay ducked. As she stood there, crouching, the man wiped his face with his hand. “You were never a little boy,” he said, shaking his head.

Fay straightened up slowly. “Was to,” she sang out. “Want me to show you?” She lifted her shirt, tugging at the waistband of her shorts.

“Woah!” He spun around, raising a hand.
Tears welled in Fay's eyes. Bobby's right, she thought. The man doesn't like me. "What makes you so smart?" she asked, blinking away the tears. She stuck out her chin and looked down her nose. "Maybe I can't smell you, but you's white trash anyway."

The man gasped and raised his hand to his head as if he was searching for something, smoothing down his hair in the process. "It doesn't take a genius to see that you're a girl."

As Fay stepped back, her foot caught on something. She jammed her toe up against it, ready to spin off it. She eased back on her heel and glanced down. A gas cap. "Why do you bother talking to me?"

"Because I like you," he said. He pulled a soft pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and lit one. A cloud of smoke circled his head. "Do you want some gum?" he asked, holding a piece out to her. His fingers were chubby.

She looked beyond his hand to the slight bulge of his pants. Reaching out to take the stick she thought, now he's going to jump me. But he just stood there, smoking the cigarette. He's perfect, she thought, like God, even if he isn't Jesus. He looked off in the direction of the canal, toward the edge of the junkyard, licking his lips lightly.

Fay watched, lips parted, as the smoke swirled about his mouth. The smoke, swirling, made her dizzy. This must be love, she thought. "What were you thinking about?" she asked.

He took another drag from the cigarette and dropped it on the ground, stubbing it out with the toe of his sandal. He smiled at her. "Yesterday," he said.

In the distance The Old Man called her name.
"Did you paint yesterday?" she asked.
"Not yet," he chuckled.
Fay opened her mouth to speak, but the man went on, still smiling. "No. No I didn't paint yesterday." He shook his head.
"Did you see your true love?"
He turned back to her. "Is that you? Fay?" he asked.
She nodded, grinning, her eyes wide.
"Aren't you going to answer him?" The man slipped his hand in the front pocket of his jeans.
Fay jumped back. The man bent over and, with the small blade of a penknife, loosened the dirt around the gas cap at her feet. He rose, snapping the blade shut. “Sometimes you gotta go, Fay, even if you don’t want to.”

Fay pursed her lips and kicked at the cap until she unearthed it. She picked it up and turned it over, shaking out the caked mud. Clapping her hand rhythmically over the mouth of the gas cap, she asked, “Where did you come from today?”

He took her wrist and raised the silver orb to her ear. “The ocean,” he said, releasing his grip. He took out a piece of chewing gum, unwrapped it and popped it in his mouth.

Fay listened for the sound of the ocean, but didn’t hear anything. “Take me with you,” she said, as she lowered her arm.

“I can’t,” he answered, smiling.

“Why not?”

“You’re a child.” He pushed his tongue out against the gum and made a bubble.

“You could do it to me,” she said, setting the gas cap on the hood ornament of a Chevy.

The bubble broke across the man’s lips. He swallowed hard. “Now, you know that wouldn’t be right, don’t you, Fay?” He poked at a bit of gum stuck in the corner of his mouth. “A man shouldn’t do something like that to a little girl,” he added.

Fay watched the man’s face closely as he spoke. “They can’t fix your car, but they’re gonna make you think they did,” Fay called out as he turned away.

“You’re pretty smart, Fay.” He paused, then said, “I gotta go now.”

“I don’t want you to go,” Fay said, her throat tightening.

“I know how you feel, Fay.” He pointed beyond the rows of disabled vehicles. “That river runs right by my house many miles away from here. The river flows right into the ocean—the same ocean where I came from today, where I was yesterday....”

Fay turned in the direction to which he pointed. “That’s not a river! It’s a moat. We live on the island on the other side.” She craned her neck around and looked at him as he stared
ahead, clear out over the roofs of Chryslers and Oldsmobiles. But she could not see the reflection of water in his eyes. She turned to the car in front of her. A big, solid, ’57 Buick. Daddy said the battery’s dead in that one, Fay thought.

“There aren’t any moats anymore, Fay. A canal, maybe, but not a moat. There’s gotta be a way out somewhere—for the water to flow. I know the river’s not far from here.”

She knew what he said was true. But she hadn’t thought about the ocean, the connection to the ocean.

Once again her body rose up off the ground, her feet landing atop the Buick. She stood, elbows and knees locked, looking out over dozens of cars. Could he be right, she wondered, could this water flow all the way to the ocean?

Music blasted from the far end of the junkyard. “It’s The Grease Monkey, again,” Fay called out, twisting her hips and swinging her elbows in time to the music. “He’s probably checking to see if the radio works before he takes it out.” The song died just as suddenly as it started. Fay found herself floating back down to earth.

The Grease Monkey ambled out from between two convertibles, a radio under each arm. He wore a battered Army flak jacket, fatigues and combat boots. With each step, cables flopped about his pant legs. A whip antenna, pressed in the crook of his arm, waved over his shoulder.

“You’ll forget me,” Fay said.

“No, I won’t,” the painter said, shaking his head. “You’ll have to trust me.”

Fay looked straight ahead through the windshield of a Chevy. The Grease Monkey passed by momentarily blocking her view of a plastic doll hanging from the rearview mirror. The doll wasn’t wearing any clothes. It had breasts, but was not tall like a Barbie doll. It was a bridal shower doll—the kind whose crocheted skirt covers a spare roll of toilet paper.

Fay crossed in front of the painter to the Chevy. “You keep talking about trust. What is trust?” She stood in front of the doll which was strung up with a length of thin wire. She heard the sound of soft shoe on dirt. She wanted the man to whistle, but he didn’t. She turned around and saw that he was further
ahead than she’d realized. She ran to catch up with him. “I love you,” she cried, touching the rib-knit cuff of his sleeve.

“I love you, too, little girl,” he said.

She felt the very breath of his words on her forehead, then heard his footsteps again. When she opened her eyes, she saw that he had reached the tow truck. Again, she ran to catch up with him. As they got closer to the garage, Fay fell behind.

The Old Man came out of the garage. “I called you. Didn’t you hear me? Get up in the truck, now, Fay.” He reached up and opened the door of the cab of the flatbed truck.

Fay mounted the high step effortlessly, climbing inside just before The Old Man slammed the door. The air inside the cab was close. Fay bounced lightly on the hot seat cushion as she watched the men talking.

The painter, smiling, nodded in her direction as he spoke to her Daddy. Her Daddy, clutching a crankshaft, leaned toward the painter, turning his head slowly from side to side like a big old sea turtle. As he spoke to the painter, he looked up at Fay through his dark glasses and tossed the crankshaft with the rest of the scrap iron on the back of the truck. The painter flinched, the smile gone from his face.

Tears came to Fay’s eyes as she studied the slender door handle. When she looked again, her Daddy was talking real fast and the painter, frowning, kept shaking his head. He’s brave, Fay thought, he doesn’t hide how he feels, even in front of my Daddy. Her Daddy started to laugh. He pulled off his glasses and dabbed at the tears on his cheeks with the back of his hand.

The door on the other side of the cab opened. “The Old Man says he’s gonna sell your services to that guy,” Bobby announced as he rifled through the glove compartment.

Fay pressed her hands against the door where the glass met the frame. “Well, that man doesn’t want me.” She kept her eyes on the painter’s hand. His hand looked warm against his cool, almost-white pants. Warm fingers, she guessed. Warm, fawn-colored fingers in the junkyard, in the junk junk junkyard.

“Nah-nah-na-nah-nah,” Bobby sang as he slid across the seat closer to her.
The painter pulled the handkerchief out of his back pocket and held it out to The Old Man. The Old Man looked at it fluttering in the wind before he took it. As he wiped his face, the handkerchief changed color, from white to grey. My Daddy’s the magician, Fay thought. The Old Man held the handkerchief out to the painter, but the painter motioned for The Old Man to keep it. The Old Man stuffed it in his back pocket without hesitation.

Pain shot through Fay’s body as Bobby laid his hands on her. She cried out, jamming a fist against his arm.

“You want to make The Old Man happy, now, don’t you?” Bobby asked, releasing her. “It’d be a whole lot easier for both of us if you did.” The cab door slammed and Bobby was gone.

Fay watched as The Old Man held his hand out to the painter, palm up. From a thin wallet, the painter produced a flash of green bills, fresh as leaves on a tree. Fay knew it was what Mama wanted all along.

As the painter walked over to his car, he looked up at Fay. She waved, hard and fast. “I love you,” she cried, as he disappeared into his car. The engine started on the first try.

The Old Man headed toward the truck, stuffing the money in his shirt pocket. The thin gold-framed sunglasses hung from the open neck of his shirt. His lips moved silently; eyes narrowed, shoulders hunched. As he opened the cab door, Fay inched her way across the worn seat. The Old Man climbed into the truck. Fay turned and looked out the back window. The painter’s car pulled out onto the driveway. The Old Man slid his hand between Fay and the back of the seat. Daddy’s hands are magic, Fay thought, ’cause they make me freeze inside even on a hot day.

“Where’s your Romeo, now?” The Old Man laughed.

The painter’s car stalled.

“You shouldn’t do this to me,” Fay cried. “I’m a little girl!” As The Old Man tightened his hold on her waist, Fay pressed against his hand with the heel of her palm. She turned back to the window again and the painter’s car pulled out of the front gate. I’m going with you, Fay thought. The pressure against her ribs grew and Fay’s body rose up off her knees, her head grazing
the steel frame of the roof of the cab. The Old Man, drawing her closer to him, filled the cabin with the ether-like smell of acetylene.

"He's a nice man," Fay whispered as The Old Man pressed her back against the steering wheel. She pounded her fists against The Old Man's shoulders.

"Hah! He doesn't like little girls," The Old Man said. He likes me, Fay thought.

*

"How did you get so dirty?" Fay's Mama asked, when Fay and her Daddy got home later that afternoon. Mama wiped her hands on a dish towel hanging on the front of the stove.

"Some guy fooled around with her—" her Daddy mumbled as he dropped his black aluminum lunchbox on the kitchen table.

"What?" her Mama exclaimed. "So what did you do about it?"

The Old Man waved a fistful of dollar bills in front of her face. "Aw, leave me alone," he bellowed. "Isn't it enough I work all day? Weather's not gonna be much better next week, I suspect." The Old Man walked over to the sink and washed his face and hands.

What does he mean? Fay wondered. The painter didn't do anything.

Fay stood in the middle of the kitchen floor looking down at her polka-dotted shorts. Mama and Daddy have a language all their own, she thought. How dirty I am has nothing to do with the painter; but my Daddy says it does. And my Mama believes him, believes my Daddy. What does it have to do with money?

Fay unwrapped the stick of gum the painter had given her and popped it in her mouth. It tasted of tobacco and salt and love. Like no chewing gum she had ever tasted before. She slipped her hand into her pocket and fingered the prospect of five flying saucers. Flying saucers were Fay's favorite penny candy. She loved breaking into the thin, wafer-like shell with her teeth, sprinkling beads of sugar on her tongue to be rolled
against the roof of her mouth 'til they melted.

Fay's mouth tasted of sugar, now. On her tongue the gum the painter had given her lay in a ball. She missed him already. Fay decided she would not buy the five flying saucers, after all. She would, instead, save her money and, when she grew up, she would buy an old klunker from her Daddy's junkyard. She'd head out, right from there. Follow the canal to the river. Like the painter said, there's gotta be a way out. And once she'd found the river, it would be easy to find the ocean. She would know it by the taste in her mouth.
Palimpsests

—for Heidi (by way of an english teacher bored by feminism)

One morning in another life
the driftwood hangers remembered their shoulders
of river trees ancient and seeping with leaves.
The faraway focus flooded the doors floating open
on tides of floral dresses, the pajamas gone haywire,
drifted into the room.
Scarves fluttered unwrapped whispered round necks
of memories,
loom birth of far cocoons the
language of mulberries and mother worms hissing
sibilantly as wisps of chinese silk crumpling on the floor.
The skirts breathed open on their pleats, the accordion bellows,
shiny french buttons unfastened the unheard song, zippers
unclenched a rasp of teeth biting no scales
of binding up.
Pants wrinkled their knees loose from the grass stains
of university lawns, the sunflower knowledge burst
tall as a sedge of seed and lights bent to love or
some glandular hysteria like a banquet set to an anniversary
yet unrealized, the lines worn by whole histories in the
pulling on and the pulling off.
The unbreasted shirts stretched their sleeves, cuffs unarmed
and panties gathered fallen one upon the other, given up
the soft cotton white muffled as if speaking through a mask
of tales, of a rivulet of rich water and secret toil.
That night the wooden hangers gave up their clothes
and returned to the river as trees and the doors
sang on their hinges, the blouses gave up their bones.
The cocoons burst open in fingers signing new languages,
cloth emptied of uniformity, the universities ran naked with knowledge,
their tenured laundry men swearing at lost tickets,
not claimed, unfound.
Out of this morning from another life the wooden hangers
walked off the job and all the clothes fell apart. Someone reported
a flood squeezing from under the door and the handyman came up,
not understanding (he was later heard to say) what sounded
like silkworms hissing in chinese, was perplexed so fixed nothing.
But you would never have come back even if he had.
Who amongst them would have believed you?

That the translation came from the spittle of mother worms
who birthed paper to carry a message to you,
how the blood mottled like mulberry ink, and reading it
the mother of trees grew right through your closet,
grew boughs strong enough to spread all the tales ever uttered
of women ten thousand years tall,
their sisters seeping with leaves, roots binding
a common ground unslaked
by whole rivers running with the knowledge
that histories borne naked into the flood
forever uncovers the seedling tongue.
Maryland

yes, i remember the bats
beating themselves against the porch light
dark shapes flitting wildly
against that fluorescent fringe
which hummed wide as a midnight blossom
that aluminum-sided country house
which gleamed near the edge
of the scrabble-heaped forest
on the land where my mom was born
where we returned every year every summer
as if we were retracing steps for her
in our blue-winged stationwagon

i remember watching the bats veer and swing
and listening to the washer in the back room
rinse through quiet unseen cycles
and thinking of the dark land this house
was sitting on, dark poison of the land
seeping through mud and the dust-scattered
gravel of the driveway
water moccasin, copperhead
indian ghost, shotgun shell
spreading through the soil and seeping up
under our beds as we slept

no amount of paving can get rid of it
not the road-side ditch clogged
with sleeping waste in summer
the half-blind hound still howls
in his kennel behind the work shed
his deaf ears full of a dull ringing
paw twitching, paw twitching
and grandmother with a hoe
hacked the heads off black snakes
she found coiled for warmth
around the hens' eggs in the morning
eyes full of a cold knowing
as she brought the edge down
and saw strange blood splatter the hay

i'm still back there
huddled with my cousins on the living room floor
out the picture window, glazed and perspiring
night has claws and thorns
is born on the backs of blood-seeking insects
and in my legs, the dull-born urge
the first words my body gave me
to get up, go out
lose myself in the crickets
and the quiet sway of corn
to get up, go out
find the dark road
and just keep walking
Scatter

Thank you for writing and we are happy to respond to your inquiries.

Yes, it was Pericles who used the masts of captured warships to build the Odeum; Hugh Capet's son was Robert The Debonair, and the Inca road system was comparable to Rome's, but Romans had more words for sex than Eskimos had for ice formations. The air brake was invented in 1869, the Rhetorical Wrench in 1844, and "prurient" is the most quiet word in the language, which is English, and which, you'll be pleased to know, happens to describe the afterlife more relentlessly than most. This should also be of interest to you since, indeed, there is life after death, even though it is extremely brief, only a moment really; but keep in mind that the closer you get to the sun the slower time revolves, so in that one sweeping moment you may well get the chance to tell your heart's desire that she was made for the light and hold each other as knowingly as roses and grape vines climbing the same sun-shot trellis. Then, again, you may find yourself giving a speech that enralls your audience but, because you have no idea what the subject is, keeps you clinging to the incomprehensible like a fly to glass, until they
abruptly, inexplicably, shift
their attention with no loss
of intensity to the sight
of chimney smoke mingling with steam
from a nearby clothes drier vent,
or to a mutilated toad
the cat proudly presented,
or to drivers slowing down as you
did one spring afternoon
to watch two ancient sisters
emerge from their swayback house
to trim great, blooming, sail-high lilacs
in the same long-awaited wind that turns
the contrails of vanished planes
into night clouds thinner than the chalk
smears your swirling eraser wiped off
the blackboard behind you where beside
The Seven Lamps of Architecture,
The Seven Champions of Christendom,
Seven Pillars of Wisdom, Seven
Deadly Sins, Seven Liberal Arts,
Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, Seven
Sages of Rome, Seven Types
of Ambiguity, The Seven Wonders
of the Ancient and Modern World,
The Seven Sacraments, The Seven
Cities of Gold and The Seven Dwarfs,
you should have written The Seven
Sisters, The Seven Continents,
Seven Against Thebes, Seven Brides
for Seven Brothers, The Seven Samurai,
The Magnificent Seven and 7-Up.
I. Frederick: The Decision

Who will I be in America? you cry. You’ll be my wife! Didn’t I go straight from the arms of war to a marriage broker? I threw down a ruble, and studied his shoe box full of photos. Yours had eyes like my father, eyes like coach lights bobbing away, dreaming. But not of me—of store-bought soap, of circuses and oranges. How can I buy such things in this country? For months I’ve told you, we can’t stay here! But you and your sister lie in our dark parlor trembling like the rabbits I killed last night for dinner. You test my patience. In heaven God will ask me, not you, what I’ve done with the talents he’s given us. You’ve had five children quick as nails pounded in a board, and another bulging out—a boy, by the way you’re jutting—like me, to be snatched from his bed for war. But what do you know about conscription? The Cossacks riding up, guns hammering on doors, and Russia’s promises to us Germans as rotten as old wood. They battered my mother, poured in, and found me so I could kill the Japanese for them. Now this is the gun Russia holds against my head: they’ll take my son to fight their wars. Against them, I am one man who speaks one language, able to die once. But in America we can make many choices. In a book I saw Minnesota, a circus of bright flowers: Queen Anne’s lace, snapdragon, verbena, forget me not. I knew that you would love them all. So yesterday I crept into our bedroom and pulled your dowry from the secret pocket of your nightgown. I’ve already spent it for our passage. Your sister’s husband has done the same. But his voice has left him, and I have to stand here for us both. Why should you cry? I’m a soldier again, alone, walking into a snowy field to face you, more frightening than an enemy whose words I can’t understand, whose guns are aimed at me.
II. Marta: The First Year in Minnesota

In this boxcar where five families
shoulder one another, I've breathed soot
for a whole year and kept my mouth shut,
even though it's so cold when I wake up,
my dress is stiff as glass. I'm twelve
and I know I'll be your oldest child
forever. I watch the babies sleeping
by the fire, amber light shining on their faces
until they glow like moons. Sometimes
my uncle Ludwig's boots clomp to me in the hoot-owl
part of night and he holds my breasts
to comfort me. But the rest of my family,
I can feel their eyes watching me
when I'm not looking. There are things
I don't know. And who can I ask?
In Russia I had a friend. The day we left,
she ran barefoot beside our wagon
as far as the bottle factory, then threw
her good shoes to me, sat down on a rock,
and cried as we rolled out of sight.
But I shouldn't cry. Father says
here in Minnesota, we're reborn to freedom.
In this crowded boxcar I watched a new baby
slide out of my mother, red and folded
like a frog. After that, my mother gave me
Ottila, my little sister. She's always
had trouble breathing, but I was stupid
not to know how to keep the air going in
and out of her like notes my uncle pulls
through his accordion. My mother could
have done it. When it happened, I was holding her
in our corner of the boxcar. At first
I couldn't even tell that she was dead.
She hung like a scarecrow in my arms
until my father cut her down. The day
they planted Ottila in the field,
a woman swathed my eyes and rubbed my belly
with chamomile. After that, I pulled my burlap
further from the fire, giving my warmth
to others. But now Ottila must be
coming up again in me. There is something
I don’t understand. Because this morning
I found blood between my legs, like my mother’s
blood before the babies come.
III. Henrietta: Farming

When we came to this sod house
all we spoke was German. I was the mother,
lugging my mother's old mirror backwards
through the door while Marta,
flicking her braids back, picked up
the chest filled with your blankets.
Can you remember how German
had just begun to hop on your tongue
like baby birds? Now your father
harnesses his broad back to the plow.
He doesn't talk. His language
is the furrow. Each day's an empty pail
I fill and carry to the kitchen.
I have laid the German dictionary
under your baby blanket in the chest.
On winter nights, beside the fire,
your sisters and I try English,
our tongues threading its tricky needle
and when we miss, we laugh.
Marta's cheeks ripen like peaches.
She winds her long hair like a woman.
Your brother, Lloyd's wrists dangle
from his cuffs. Only you
get no older. Ottila, I keep close
the German words for Hi and Are you
cold, in case, rounding some corner,
I might see you. For going on,
do you forgive us?
IV. Frederick: The Drought

In Russia, my hungry father tending pigs
stole their rotten apples and ate them,
where they settled down in his stomach like eyes
accusing him. He stood among the hogs,
a handsome man, but lord of nothing,
brooding because he couldn’t feed his children,
shouting prophecies from Jeremiah till his mouth
flamed like a righteous fire. In the end he
picked up a scythe and screamed through the pig sty,
loosening rivers of blood. He died
mumbling that he was The Angel of Destruction.

I’m a father now. When I let the Schmidtts
take Lloyd and Berta to work for five months
for two pair of shoes, who was I listening to?
God makes things hard, to prove me.
He pounds his hail fists down to shred
our crops, and then he whispers, Now provide.
I am only a man. Jeremiah bobs out of my mouth
feebly, like a kite torn by the wind
while Henrietta stands at the window, watching me.
She walked five miles to the Schmidtts
and brought the children back, Lloyd flaming

in a sunset of fever. I slapped Henrietta,
then ran out to cut sod all night to build the barn.
Can you put your ear down low enough to hear
the tiny scraping of wheat straws? The sound of terror.
On this prairie a man can reason and reason
but the drought goes on. The wheat dries up
like a song with no notes, silent on its stalk.
Did Henrietta save the children so they could starve
slowly, tongues black, bellies distended?
I grip a knife, which wants to lunge
at the eyes shining all around me in this dark.
V. Marta: Inventing Herself

What kind of a name is Marta?
Like a scar on the tongue.
My mother sews me long skirts
which sweep the dirt floors,
smu$dng my future so I'll have to stay
with her forever. But even in the boxcar
I began to move away from her fire.
And how can I stay in the small, boring
days my parents build for us?
At school I try to scrub my accent off.
At home, I lie in bed, turning pages
that show store-bought clothes.
I want to be shaken in a sudden wind,
snapped out new like an American flag.
That's why, when the girls at school
say they can cure me of my name,
I sneak into town with Berta
and we find the address they've
written on the paper. When we knock
on the door, the most popular girl
answers. She opens it
to her father's dark barber shop
and hands us knives. The air is sour
with astringents. Everyone stands
in a circle and sings
while I sit gripping the barber chair,
muscle$ as my uncle Ludwig's arms.
They cut my hair, each one stepping up
and s.awing at a hank until
it's too short to braid.
You are not Marta, they chant
three times and when I look in the mirror
it is as though I've crossed the border
into my own country. I am not
Marta. I did not
kill my sister. My name is
Martha and I am walking
backwards, fast,
away from my parents.
I will never stop.
Sweet Cake, Small Stories, a Few Words on Failure

*The Music of Failure*. Essays by Bill Holm. Prairie Grass Press, P.O. Box 3226, Minneapolis, MN 55403, 1990. 100pp. $9.95/pa.

*The Dead Get By With Everything*. Poems by Bill Holm. Milkweed Editions, P.O. Box 3226, Minneapolis, MN 55403, 1991. 96pp. $8.95/pa.

Just as in life, in Art we seldom take a flyer. Our paintings rarely take risks; our music is retro and imitative; our poetry hardly ever "leaps." There are exceptions, certainly, artists worthy of our acclaim, women and men who would never think of playing it safe. Okay, then; name them. Who is pushing through the walls with their canvases the way the Cubists and Abstract Expressionists did? Where are the "Revolver" and "Sgt. Pepper" of the 80s and 90s? Can you name five poets writing today who are really doing something new?

This is a dare, not a slap in the face. There are good, exciting artists in every field, and paintings, music, and poetry to be proud of. There is no sense in talking numbers; no sense in percentages. Originals are few; the careful are legion. The careful paint very well; often enough they have a formula, a way to a result, and a result that pleases their disciples. They stumbled upon their results on the way up the mountainside, and they found that what they stumbled upon was received well by a loyal (albeit small) following. And they found that these followers were happy to be gifted with pretty much the same results over and over again. An enormous percentage of people who were raised on rock 'n' roll now listen to "classic rock." Poets, afraid that any sudden turns or wild accelerations might lose those behind them, keep turning out the same tasty treats—the same recipe, the same satisfied smiling faces.

These careful artists don't have to put it on the line anymore; they can't put it on the line anymore. Official pats-on-the-back, University blessings, and the knowing nods of funding committees might well be lost if anyone's toes were to get crunched. So they tread softly, watch their step, and finally get to wallow in the success they've established, reap the rewards, such as they are.
They don't however, paint the best pictures they could. Their music isn't quite what it might be. Poems walk a dry land between "good" and "good enough"—while the horizon is bright, all aglow, and a long, long way off.

Why are we so afraid of failure, so unwilling to take a chance, and embarrassed to get back up, dusty and sore, after we've been thrown for a loop? When I say "we," I'm not exactly sure who I mean, but I know it takes in a lot of us. I was tempted to say "We Americans..." but then thought better of it. Maybe it's "We products of the Twentieth Century." I'm not sure, though. I suspect geography has nothing to do with it; and while I believe that things were different in earlier times, I'd be hard put to prove it.

I remember a bit of wisdom I picked up from a neighbor when I was a boy. An old guy who loved and lived for baseball, he would say—when baseball had nothing at all to do with anything—"whoever can get three hits every ten times at bat is going to get carried into the Hall of Fame." Whenever I heard this, it was a safe bet that one of my friends or I was red-faced and flat on our ass, either literally or metaphorically. Isn't there something American, even ethical, about getting back onto the bicycle, about trying and trying again? (And isn't this a great game, baseball, where you can fail seven times out of ten and still be a hero?)

Failure is a major concern of Bill Holm's writing. Not as you might think; it is not the worry of his poems missing their mark, or of his essays falling short. He probably knows that there is no problem there. What interests Holm is the idea of failure, what it means, and how we react to it.

The ground bass is failure; America is the key signature; Pauline Bardal is the lyrical tune that sings at the center; Minnesota, Minnesota is the staff on which the tunes are written; poverty, loneliness, alcoholism, greed, disease, insanity, war, and spiritual and political emptiness are the tempo markings.

This is "The Music of Failure: Variations on an Idea," the title piece in a book of Holm's essays. The "true subject" of the tune, "the melody that counterpoints everything but is never heard..., is my own life, and yours, and how they flow together to make the life of a community, and then a country, and then a world."
It is far too easy to fail. As a teen, Holm could define failure: “to die in Minnesota.” He knew, however, that you could substitute just as well “any small town in Pennsylvania, or Nebraska, or Bulgaria.” He adopted what seemed like a reasonable American Dream: “To be an American meant to move.” He wanted to step out of his life and carry on, new. His own ancestors had “transcended Iceland,” and had risen to a hard-won and well-appreciated ground.

...I would die a famous author, a distinguished and respected professor at an old university, surrounded by beautiful women, witty talk, fine whiskey, Mozart.

Holm got out of Minneota—he traveled, got educated, married, divorced, “and worldly.” America was, in those days, being tripped up by the war in Southeast Asia. Presidents were being shot. One, who was brought to Washington by an overwhelming mandate, was run out of town the same way. Our waters and our skies were turning black, our cities choking on their own vomit. The American Dream was looking more and more like a nightmare. Holm aged from 20 to 40 very fast.

* * *

There are lines from Leaves of Grass:

With music strong I come, with my cornets and my drums,
I play not marches for accepted victors only, I play
marches for conquer’d and slain persons.

Have you heard that it was good to gain the day?
I also say that it is good to fall, battles are lost in the
same spirit in which they are won.

I beat and pound for the dead,
I blow through my embouchures my loudest and gayest
for them.

Vivas to those who have fail’d!

But America was not listening to Whitman.
Holm was back in Minneota, and for what it was worth, he thought of himself as a failure. He quickly came to realize, though, that his was not so private a Hell. His friends, too, had all been divorced; most of them were also short of money and working at jobs he knew had no place in their Dream 20 years ago. Physical beauty and health had begun to fade.

It looked, as the old cliché had it, as if we were going to die after all, and the procedure would not be quite so character-building as the Reader’s Digest and the Lutheran minister implied.

The people you talked to might have denied it, but the song that kept playing over and over in their heads was the music of failure. Our history books bulge with success and good fortune, but twice as many pages would be needed to record the fits and starts, the trips, traps, and contradictions, the failures on which our nation and our hopes are built.

*    *    *

Above me, wind does its best to blow leaves off the Aspen tree a month too soon. No use, wind, all you succeed in doing is making music, the noise of failure growing beautiful.

Holm tells us that when he wrote this poem “years ago” he did not really know what it meant. Apparently (and no surprise here) he was quite a competent musician, “never so skilled...as to have made a genuine living from it, (but) skilled enough to know precisely the deficiencies of every performance I ever gave.” He realized that perfection was a rare gift: “Mozart may have had it. I did not.”

And—no argument—perfection is nice. But so is a competently presented piece. Let the wind blow as it may; the aspen leaves make beautiful music. Enjoy it.

*    *    *
Holm's memories of Pauline Bardal may be more to the point. She was the family's housekeeper and his nurse, one of the first generation of Icelandic immigrants in western Minnesota. She was nearly 60 when Holm was just a boy, and was to live 30 years more.

Pauline, in American terms, was a great failure: always poor, never married, living in a shabby small house when not installed in others' backrooms, worked as a domestic servant, formally uneducated, English spoken with the odd inflections of those who learn it as a second language, gawky and not physically beautiful, a badly trained musician whose performance would have caused laughter in the cities. She owned nothing valuable, traveled little, and died alone, the last of her family. If there were love affairs, no one will now know anything about them, and everyone involved is surely dead. Probably she died a virgin, the second most terrible fate, after dying broke, that can befall an American.

Despite this, an undeniable cataract of facts, boyhood memories bring a kind of serene redemption. Each evening, Pauline would retire for a half hour of music, a time to which young Holm looked forward. "Music was not a trifling matter even if your hands were fresh from flour bin or hen house."

(M)usic was her true spiritual exercise. She always played slowly, and I suppose, badly, but it made no difference. She transported both herself and me by the simple act of playing.

Whitman's cornets and drums are joined by Pauline's piano, a music to celebrate the vanquished as well as the victor, the flawed as well as the pure. (The epigraph of a poem by Stephen Dunn tells of Eastern artisans who, when weaving their tapestries, put flaws in on purpose, since nothing but God can be perfect.)

* * *

So, what exactly is failure? And what are we to make of it? Could you argue that Scott Joplin failed?

He never smiled, his friends said, but looked out at you
from those doleful eyes,
like turned-down gas lamps
set in a coal-black wall.
He did not sing
the song of the happy darkie
to set toes tapping
in St. Louis whorehouses.
The darkness within him
was darker and lovelier than
the elegant black curve of his nose—
than the smooth black hands
moving over the ivory keys—
blackbirds flying in a fog.

As if the circumstances of time and place and color were not
even to tear at Joplin's heart, he was visited by other, greater
pain. He had a daughter who died young, "whose dying split his
heart/like a sounding board." In a few old photographs you can
see his sad face:

Perhaps he knew what would come,
brain gone, hands trembling,
silent piano waiting in the corner—
an upright coffin with teeth—

Often in Holm's work it is literally music that saves a failure;
or maybe not saves it exactly, but goes on with it side by side.
Two men are canoeing on Rainy Lake, "where Canada and
Minnesota come together at the bullseye of the continent." It
is 1913. One is a Harvard man; the other, Ojibwa. On this
particular May evening nothing can be heard but the soft
cracking of the lake-ice around them. There are otter and
moose. Then, while Billy McGee paddles, Oberholzer reaches
down into the ribs of the canoe for his violin.

He tightens the bow, rosins its hair, tunes. Bare fifths ring
over splashing fish, moose breathing. He bows a chord—D
minor Bach's Chaconne. Neither moose, otter, nor Indian
know this music, though they have heard it many times
before. They listen. The violin misses notes in this spiny
grandiose piece, yet sound goes swelling up from that canoe
into the night, as if the canoe itself were being bowed by
something invisible beside it in the water.
* * *

Much of what we have is not of our own doing, not our own failing; much of it is a matter of genealogy. Holm’s hands betray the Josephsons of his family tree. And when he begins to roar in arguments, it is his father’s roaring he hears, “the Gislason arrogance.”

I’ll be living with all
these dead people inside me.
How will I ever feed them?
They taught me, dragging carcasses
a thousand winters across
the tundra inside their own bodies.

In an old family photograph Great-great grandfather Gis-
lason, with “farmer’s shoulders” and a long white beard, “no longer believes in God.”

He has accepted the unfairness
of the universe with good humor.
He lives with
Great-great grandmother Gislason.

From beside him in the same photograph his wife looks out “fiercely” from

under her Icelandic bonnet,
an owl who just discovered
she is a mathematical prodigy—
This is not a woman
to be monkeyed with!

It doesn’t take long to see that you cannot get an accurate account of your successes, a true sense of your failings, and what they mean, without the perspective of hindsight. It is not only the cards you’ve been dealt, but how you play the hand. It may even have more than a little to do with your poker face.

* * *
In Holm's search for the meaning of it all, he goes back to the story of *Gilgamesh*, an epic that predates Homer and *Genesis* and almost everything else we know by at least 1000 years. *Gilgamesh*, the King, is worried about a dream he has had: a star had fallen from the sky, and despite his every effort, he could not prevent it. Soon after this, he dreams again, this time of an axe: "When I tried to lift it, I failed." The mighty King, so powerful and secure in his life, had never known failure before. As Holm has it, the failure that disturbs his dream is, in fact, "the longing for full consciousness as a human." Or, as *Gilgamesh* comes to it: "A man sees death in things. This is what it is to be a man." In failure, *Gilgamesh* finds this wisdom, but

...before he does, the whole country suffers from his thoughtlessness. There is surely a lesson here, even thousands of years later, for countries that insist on denying it and being led by those who have never gone through the failure and grief necessary to see this "death in things."

When an old woman goes for the first time to the immigrant graveyard, she finds her name on every stone.

It's good to die so many times, she says, to feel the death shuttering in your bones so often; when muscles practice this well they move with a dancer's delicate grace

Icelandic immigration plays into nearly every poem and essay, the women and men who left Vopnafljordur, Floi, and Jokulldal, "some for coffee, some for land,/Some no doubt for the hell of it." Once here, they found a sun-bright space in the wilderness. "They farmed,/Grumbled, voted Republican," and in a much shorter time than you might expect, "you could/Not tell them from the others."

In the third generation, all that was left: Sweet cake, small stories, a few words whose meaning Slunk away to die under the mental stone That buries all the lost languages in America

With one's language goes one's soul—not the first loss, but
perhaps the greatest, in this hard journey from Icelandic to American cultures. Another casualty is faith: decrying his "Christian baggage," Holm is challenged by a Believer:

My baggage is her furniture; she lives
in my fire sale, serves tea every day in thin
blue porcelain cups that she imagines me
smashing one after the other
with arrogant clumsiness, tossing them into
the fearful darkness outside her parlor window.

Belief was packed into every trunk that was carried along the waters between Canada and the States. Belief is a big part of Rose's life. The failure here is not in its loss, but in its weight. For some, it is more difficult to carry. Rose used to disappear at church picnics, and the men would have to fan the fields until they found her "preaching in Icelandic/to the cornstalks." She wrote a letter to the Pope in 1939

demonstrating to him clearly
the error of his opinions, giving him
in calm prose, one more chance
to be a Lutheran.

Wisdom is in seeing not the knot but the rope. Although jaded and cynical, deep inside himself Holm knows that there is hope. You just have to know what it is you are looking at, what it is that you should be seeing.

Why this anger at grass or pigweed
or aphids killing honeysuckle?
This is just what happens in the world.
It's us who fertilize our own
miseries and love them.
We are a human patch of dandelions,
each yellow flower mumbling;
one more war, one more of those
presidents and we'll stop.
Every drink is the drunk's last one,
then the next one, and the next one,
and we all know it, whatever
public lies we tell each other
while bending our heads to the hoe.
See the knot? See the rope? The work will win out: the mess of weeds will be beaten again, and again we will grow what we need. Just another problem. Another obstacle to be dealt with. The men and women who go forward and work with their hearts and their souls and their backs may fail, but there is plenty to celebrate in their going forward. The team that lost the World Series was still playing ball in October. Lots of other players were sprawling in front of a t.v. They wish they lost the World Series. What a game, baseball. We learn to appreciate, and celebrate, the trying, the living.

There is the happy sparrow who “jumps and eats—a world of red barns, snow, old clotheslines and corn kernels is enough.” Birds don’t fret over the obvious—hunger, death and such. “(N)o suspicion among the sparrows.” Let the man who learns from failing make his own way.

In a world of grief, no one has any right to such gifts as I am given; I take them, put on my feathers, and go dance on the snow
Contributors’ Notes

Ken Armitage-Kawaji was born in Japn, Ibaragi Prefecture, in 1954.

Charles Bukowski is working on Pulp, a detective novel. His book The Last Night of the Earth Poems (1992) is published by Black Sparrow Press, who is also working on a volume of his letters from the 60s.

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Joel Lewis is the author of House Rent Boogie (The Yellow Press) and the winner of the Ted Berrigan Memorial Award for 1991. He is the editor of Bluestones and Salt Hay, an anthology of contemporary New Jersey poets, published by Rutgers University Press. He lives in Hoboken, NJ.

Lyn Lifshin is the author of many collections of poetry, including Madonna Who Shifts for Herself and Kiss the Skin Off.
She recently edited *Tangled Vines: Poems to Celebrate and Explore the Relationship Between Mothers and Daughters*. A documentary by Mary Ann Lynch, *Lyn Lifshin: Not Made of Glass*, was recently made about the poet.

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**Paul Violi**'s sixth book of poems, *The Curious Builder*, has been published by Hanging Loose Press.

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