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Bathtub Grottos

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Bathtub Grottos

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Leeandra M. Nolting

B.F.A. University of Evansville, 2002

December 2006

Acknowledgments

Poems in this collection appeared in the following publications, occasionally under different titles or forms:

Connecticut Review: “Melanoma”

Ellipsis: “Grotto,” “A Description of the Morning,” “Boy with *The Cyclone*,” “Hell’s Lullaby,” “Kentucky Nocturne #1,” “Kentucky Nocturne #7”

The Evansville Review: “Heels,” “Ars Poetica”

The Formalist: “Kentucky Nocturne #7”

Maple Leaf Rag III: “Love is a Matter of Chemistry, Sex is a Matter of Physics,” “Ars Poetica”

Dedication

I'm dedicating this thesis to Kim Hahn because my mother tells me I have to. Mrs. Hahn is the mother of my classmate Brock Hahn, who sat kitty-corner from me in first grade and who, for the first month of school, threw up almost every morning at precisely 9:15. But that's not why I have to dedicate this to her. Mrs. Hahn has the unfortunate distinction of being my eighth grade catechism teacher. In addition to preparing us for martyrdom if the situation warranted, she was charged with showing us a bishop-approved sex ed. video starring a pair of overweight middle-aged catechism teachers clad in black t-shirts emblazoned with "ESTROGEN" and "TESTOSTERONE" who performed a song-and-dance number called "The Hormone Rap."

Now, I don't remember at the age of thirteen ever telling Mrs. Hahn--or anyone else, for that matter--that I was going to write some sort of book and I certainly didn't promise to dedicate said book to her, but every time she runs into my mother, she asks what I'm up to nowadays and when that book's going to get dedicated to her, and then Mom calls me up and reminds me that I'm falling behind in keeping a promise that I never made in the first place.

So, OK, Mrs. Hahn, here's your damn book. And here's what I've been up to. I now live in New Orleans' French Quarter in a former whorehouse that I'm told was built by Huey Long. I have a literal stage in my bedroom. I collect obituaries and horrifically bad LPs. On Mardi Gras I dress up as a pregnant schoolgirl, right down to the saddle shoes. I've been mistaken for a lesbian, a Jew, a lawyer, and a schizophrenic homeless panhandler--and been given seventy-seven cents for my troubles. Supposedly I've had an affair with William Faulkner, even though horny old Bill's been dead for as long as I've known him. Despite all best attempts otherwise, somehow I've remained a practicing Catholic. For what it's worth, maybe you didn't do such a bad job with what was an unpaid and completely thankless task.

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Preface

I'm some combination of bemused and irritated to do what I'm doing here (and which I have to do quite often at open mikes and other readings), which is to justify the use of traditional forms, humor, and religious imagery in my work. After all, a hundred and fifty years ago--and for many hundreds of years before that--a poet who wrote almost exclusively in free verse, never met a pun he liked, and took a decisively heterodox and iconoclastic spiritual stance would be the poet who would have some explaining to do. But, times change, so here goes.

Unlike many poets writing today, I do not consider meter and rhyme to have died with the Victorians. (Nor am I a strict formalist--as you can see from this manuscript, I do occasionally work in free verse.) This comes not from a retreat into the past, but from the simple fact that despite technological advances, I don't consider our century markedly different from all the centuries that preceded it, and don't consider us in need of a radically different poetic to capture the zeitgeist. Pre-nuclear age, Willa Cather wrote that "there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they never happened before." The big subjects--love, hatred, death, jealousy, beauty, God, creation, corruption, etc.--have been around forever. There really is nothing new under the sun, at least as far as human nature is concerned. Poets have been exploring the same questions through the ages, and the poems that survive the test of time survive because they have a catchy rhythm and/or rhyme that acts as a mnemonic device to transcend the loss of the original meaning ("Ring Around the Rosy" is sung by children seven hundred years after the Black Death swept England; likewise the rhymes of Mother Goose can be recited by people who have no idea who Humpty Dumpty and company really were), because they convey a universal message that transcends the lack of easily recognizable rhythm and rhyme (Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"), or because they

accomplish both (Shakespeare's sonnets, Tennyson's "Ulysses", etc., etc., etc.). We like things that we can remember, and meter and rhyme can certainly help us do so.

Some New Formalists assert that our attraction to metrical patterns is biological in origin, and while I am no biologist, I can certainly see validity to their argument. Nearly every physical activity human beings engage in requires a mastery of a certain rhythm. The heart beats and rests. We breathe in and breathe out. A baby learning to walk must not only be strong and balanced enough to stand on his own two feet, but find the rhythm in shifting his weight from one side to the other. Later, when he is playing on a swingset, he must figure out how to bend his legs and arms in the right rhythm, or the swing will go nowhere. Indeed, even the very act of creating more human beings requires rhythm. And it is not just in the strictly physical realm that rhythm affects us physiologically--our very brains seem wired for it. A constant bright light shining won't do much to us other than irritate our retinas, but have that same light blink at exactly 120 times a minute, and an epileptic can have a grand mal seizure.

Related to our attraction to metrical pattern is our attraction to rhyme, a pattern of similar sound and identical accent in two or more words. We like things that match. We remember things more easily when they rhyme. (To those who would doubt this assertion, I'll share that for the past fifteen years--despite my best efforts otherwise--a radio jingle for an Indianapolis-area pizza parlor has been intermittently playing in my head, reminding me that "six-three-four-four-four-four brings Noble Roman's to [my] door." I'm not usually a gambler, but I'd be willing to bet that every person reading this can tell a similar story about an annoying song or commercial that got stuck in his or her head. I would also be willing to bet that it rhymes.) And I believe that rhyme is a tool poets today--especially self-proclaimed "serious" poets--who want their work to be noticed ignore all too often. After all, it's hard to take someone's message

seriously when you can't remember what exactly was said in the first place, and rhyme makes it easier to not only remember word-for-word, but to memorize far more effortlessly than it is to memorize blank or free verse.

Of course, meter and rhyme can lend themselves quite well to humorous poetry, a type of poetry that we have far too little of today. A pattern of meter and rhyme, once established, sets up an expectation for the reader or listener--and most jokes are based on two things: a juxtaposition of disparate elements, and a careful balance of meeting and subverting expectations. (Knock-knock jokes--while mostly groaners--are a good example of the second part of this. They work because they build on an understood pattern: I say, "Knock-knock;" you say, "Who's there?" and so on.)

One of the funniest parodies I've ever read--X.J. Kennedy's "A Visit from St. Sigmund"--demonstrates this theory of humor perfectly. Kennedy's poem--inspired by a statement from Margaret Mead that "Freud is just an old Santa Claus"--juxtaposes two extremely disparate-yet-well-known elements: the Christmas poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (more commonly known as "The Night Before Christmas"), and various Freudian buzzwords. Since a fair portion of the population knows lines from "The Night Before Christmas" by heart ("On Dasher, on Dancer, on Prancer, On Vixen!/ On Comet, on Cupid, on Donner and Blitzen!") Kennedy can meet and subvert expectations with gems like "Now Schizo, now Fetish, now Fear of Castration!/ On Paranoia! On Penis-fixation!" And, while being very humorous, in this poem Kennedy makes a serious statement about the limitations and ridiculousness of certain aspects of Freudian theory.

It is this aspect of humorous poetry--satire--that most interests me. I have written quite a few parodies and/or homages of other poets' work, some of which are in this manuscript. I find that when I am writing a parody of a poet or poem I hold in low regard--William Carlos

Williams' grossly overrated "The Red Wheelbarrow"; Rodgers and Hammerstein's "My Favorite Things"--I will use the parody to directly make fun of the poet or poem in question. However, when parodying a poet or poem that I much admire--Jonathan Swift, Robert Browning, William Blake--I find that I will use the original poem as a springboard to parody something else that the imagery of the poem suggests. My parody, then, becomes more of an homage. "A Description of the Morning"--a straight-up updating of the Swift poem of the same name--is not meant to make fun of either Swift or his poem, but to poke fun at the hypocrisy and petty corruption seemingly inherent in human nature, which does not seem to change between 18th century London and 21st century small-town America. Likewise, "Siegfried and Roy" is not meant to rib Blake or "The Tyger," but to clarify the juxtaposition of the natural grace and beauty of the Siberian tigers with the completely fake and rather bizarre world that is Las Vegas in general and Siegfried and Roy's magic act in particular.

And then we get to the biggest juxtaposition of them all--that of the natural and supernatural worlds and the resulting comedy and tragedy of the attempts and inability of the former to ever fully embody the latter. A friend of mine told me that I had a very Catholic aesthetic in my work, even in those poems which were not specifically religious in content. I thought that he didn't know what he was talking about until I really thought about it. The Catholic religion is, of course, a sacramental one, one steeped in "outward signs of inward grace." In other words, the constant intersection of carnality with spirituality, a faith which is very much at home in the physical world while at the same time being about another.

I chose to entitle this manuscript "Bathtub Grottos" for a very specific reason--a bathtub grotto is probably the closest thing to a statement of aesthetics that anyone will ever get from me. If there is one truly representative example of man's sincere attempt to create a beautiful, lasting,

physical expression of deep faith clashing with his complete inability to do so, a bathtub grotto has got to be it. A staple of the lower-income Catholic yard, a bathtub grotto is made by taking an old clawfoot bathtub, turning it on end, burying it about halfway, and sticking a poured concrete representation of some saint underneath (usually Our Lady of Grace, though St. Joseph and St. Anthony are popular among Italian-Americans and the Virgin of Guadalupe is popular among Mexican-Americans). Occasionally, the builder of said grotto will line up the bathtub's drain with the back of the statue's head for a halo effect. I have tried over the years to figure out why it is that these tacky little shrines so appeal to me. On one hand, they are just about the homeliest-looking displays of religious kitsch in existence. On the other hand, the faith which compels people to build these in their yards--the construction of a bathtub grotto is not something which can be undertaken lightly, as a clawfoot tub usually needs to be set in cement to keep it from tipping over--is completely sincere, perhaps sincere enough to blind the builders to the grottos' inherent clumsiness. And there is a certain poignancy to the idea of making do with what you have on hand and figuring that God will understand what you were trying to do.

Though I have a (literal) tongue-in-cheek poem in this manuscript titled "Ars Poetica," perhaps the real ars poeticas are the first and last poems, "Grotto" and "Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico, 1941." The first, about (what else?) a bathtub grotto, I chose to begin the manuscript because I believe it introduces the major elements of my work that I've talked about so far--the traditional form, the humor, the Catholic worldview--while hopefully dealing with all of these in a new way. However, I chose "Moonrise..." to end the manuscript for the precise reason that it breaks every single "rule" I try to give myself: it's in free verse, it's completely serious, and the supernatural is not found on the earth but in the vast emptiness surrounding it. For about a year, I tried to write this poem in blank verse, but it didn't work. I tried to figure out

why--and then it occurred to me. Adams' masterpiece breaks every single rule of great landscape photography. It makes no use of color and really very little use of light and shadow. The focal point is in the dead center of the picture as opposed to being on the intersection of trisecting lines. Two-thirds of the frame consists of unrelieved blackness. And yet, somehow it works. It's my hope that the poem does the same.

Grotto

A dozen cans of Comet wouldn't clean
the stars of lime off of her stainless crown.
From Heaven or the bathtub's rim comes down
a faint and rusty radiance. Hail Queen

Enthroned Down Here, Concrete Virginity,
Madonna of the Cul-de-sacs, Who Reigns
Amid the Delta 88s and Fords,
the Lawnboys and the Sears Extension Cords,
Our Lady of the Mostly Suburbane!
The mother of pragmatic piety,

she stands, chipped but serene, guarding the way
to the house behind, where TVs blare the soaps.
She pays no mind, this guiding light of hope
to all drained patrons of the everyday.

Aubade at 4:31

My alarm clock and I
have a suicide pact.

Its is the more dramatic end:
the ringing of its maladjusted bell
sends it dancing a lopsided spiral
towards the dresser's edge. Once there,
it hurls itself screaming to the carpet.
On impact it disengages its voice,
folds itself into
its little black
travel-sized coffin.

And already outdone,
I head off to work.

Summing Up

New Year's Eve Day, 2005, Canal Street, New Orleans

so much depends
upon

a green refri
gerator

wrapped with duct
tape

beside the Popeye's Fried
Chicken

Regret

five minutes to closing
Wal-Mart store #1180
Greensburg, Indiana--

thoroughly skanky
grossly obese
trailer-park-mama
dragging her filthy
pantless toddler
through my checkout
just as I was about
to count down the register

three pairs size two
red lace thong underpants
a half-pound bag of peanut M & Ms
a pack of fishing lures:

why, oh why,
did I not ask for her life story?

The Christmas Story

I've been home forty-five minutes and my mother is hinting for grandbabies I'm not surprised because the last time I saw her she came to visit me and she'd been in New Orleans two hours before we were at Pat O'Brien's and she was asking for grandbabies when I lived in Kentucky it was half-hillbilly grandbabies when I lived in England it was half-Cockney grandbabies when I was in Mexico I don't remember what the phrasing was but now that I'm in Louisiana she can't decide if she wants them half-Cajun or half-black I tell her I think she just wants ones that talk funny and volunteer to clip their tongues in infancy but she tells me that no one likes a smartass so I go back to eating my soup she cooks in this giant cast iron pot big enough for twenty people even though there's never been more than six living here and now it's just her and Dad Dad says he doesn't care what half of what they are or what the hell they talk like as long as they don't look like me because if they look like me they'll look like him and then Mom won't love them the cat jumps up on the table and starts licking the fur off his genitals but Mom doesn't notice till the cat starts purring then she smacks him with the ladle the cat doesn't yowl or anything but he moves to a chair and now he's in a quandary because he has tomato juice on his side but he also still has genitals so he sort of alternates but you can tell he's not happy about the situation I eat my soup and Mom tells Dad its not because she looks like you it's because she looks like your mother and this is true I look exactly like Grandma did in 1952 which is OK with me except that now she looks like George Washington and I don't want to look like that when I'm old now they're in an argument that they've been having for twenty years when I was five Mom said that if she died before Dad she wanted to be cremated not buried and she tried to get him to promise her he'd do that because she'd bury him if that's what he wanted even though she thinks that's gross with all the worms and stuff but Dad wouldn't promise to cremate her because that would upset his mother and what did it matter what he did with her body because by then she'd be dead anyway then they got into a fight about that and Dad put his fist through the wall and Mom made my little brother promise to cremate her when she died except my little brother was three at the time and he started crying so she gave me a dollar to promise her that I'd do it and the hell with what Dad and his yellow-eyed inbred Missouri Synod Lutheran family said now my brother comes home with his girlfriend and they ask what happened to the cat but don't wait for an answer they go to the basement to watch a movie I asked my brother once when we both were drunk on Boone's Farm what was the strangest movie he'd had sex during and he told me and I asked him have you no soul and he said no he didn't anymore because when he was ten and I was twelve he lost it in a ten-dollar bet about an episode of *The Brady Bunch* we'd drawn up a deed and everything and I'd just forgotten my brother always jokes about buying his soul back for a dollar says I've let it depreciate considerably that's true his soul was the worst investment I've ever made the cat's really meowing despondently now and I've finished my soup and want another bowl but the ladle's probably got cat hair on it so instead I take the cat to the kitchen to wash him off which he doesn't really like much but he's got that tomato juice on his side and that's distracting him from his genitals and when he's not distracted he can lick himself to sleep and who am I to take that away from him?

Mea Culpa

I'm sorry that I let the dog chew on
your legs, transforming you from "Gold 'n' Glit-
ter" into "Bear-Mauled" Barbie. I'm the one--
not my brother--who melted your tits
with the magnifying glass. I'm sorry for shit
I let the neighbor boys inflict on you:
skin grafts and amputations, pubes and zits
splotched on with Marks-A-Lot...Brand-spanking new,
you couldn't keep your looks for long. It's true--
one summer afternoon I jammed your head
atop Ken's body, making "Russian Crew
Team" Barbie. But, despite the things I said
when Mom could hear, like, "Let's go to the dance!"--
I'm sorry, Babs. You never stood a chance.

Love is a Matter of Chemistry, Sex is a Matter of Physics

The Wilsons, teachers of the sciences
at Greensburg High, they gave us secret hope,
us nerds and geeks, for their alliances
produced proof--offspring--not just corny jokes.
We wisecracked on their use of microscopes
in school van backseats coming home from Quiz
Bowl meets, and tried experimental gropes
in front of *X-files*-tuned TVs. But whiz
kids though we were, we didn't factor this:
they saw through our postulating innocence,
bemused at our double-blind attempts to kiss
the other virgin guinea pigs, who, dense
and horny, never realized when we blundered.
Without controls, we never really wondered.

Heels

While clomping down the aisle to get the Host,
I think about my mother and my aunts
when I was very young: a winter night,
a second-cousin's wedding, toes that swerved
unnaturally inside nude hose, the coats
with rows of empty pumps beneath, the face
each wore to recount labors lasting days.

The pre-teen daughters of that marriage know
now how to walk in grown-up shoes, the slant
their feet must take to hold the rest upright.
And me, I've never mastered heels, although
you'd think I would have learned by now the way
knees bend (or shouldn't bend), the way backs curve
to keep the wearers in a state of grace.

Ars Poetica

At ten, I smeared on cherry menthol smiles
in hopes of making males get mouths as numb
as mine. This plan didn't work. The dumb
things shied away, afraid of girly wiles.

So desperate to seduce, I once bagged
a redneck neighbor boy, then called it love
to all my friends, making no mention of
the time I loosed his pinch of Skoal and gagged.

Go ahead. Laugh at me. All I can say
for those romantic liars like myself:
whatever else we do with tongues and lips,
we always kiss and tell in such a way
to mesmerize, forever spinning wealth
from straws of pathos and distasteful slips.

To Romantic Failures

with sincerest apologies to Robert Browning

A man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a wet dream for?

Commentary

There was a Scoutmaster named Royce
Who had a slight lisp to his voice.
When asked, "Are you gay?"
He said, "No! I'm O.K.--
I don't like men; I like boys."

Optimism, or Death to Julie Andrews

Raindrops on outlets and tumors on kittens,
stinging barbed nettles and spider-filled mittens,
tick-tocking packages, knotted shoestrings--
these are a few of my least favorite things.

Dentist chairs, nasal hairs, pus-oozing gashes,
flash burns that sear off eyebrows and eyelashes,
pee-stained old mattresses, phones that don't ring--
these are a few of my least favorite things.

Shake-n-Bake, Ricki Lake, old folks' smell, poodles,
Sunday school, baby drool, undercooked noodles,
jet planes that take off with ice on their wings--
these are a few of my least favorite things.

When my car dies, when my checks bounce,
when I'm drenched in vomit,
I simply recall all my least favorite things,
and then I don't feel like shit.

Dot

for Becky Butler, who accidentally shelved L. Frank Baum next to Betty Friedan

So you went home to Auntie Em, and woke
to find your high heels gone, your dog unhurt,
and things all back to normal on the farm--
except, sometimes a rainbow in a pool

of tractor oil still forces you to choke
back sobs, and during harvest time the gold
of wheat can make you long for someplace green
and populous. Your daughter burns her bras

and says your husband has no brains or heart.
You drive to Wichita to see your old
friend Judy, now divorced (though that has harmed
her less than all that Valium). When the beans
are canned, you ponder going back to school.
You think, in toto, there's no place like Oz.

Siegfried and Roy

with abject apologies to William Blake

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
on billboards in the desert night:
those pompadours, mascaraed eyes
so queerly framed thy symmetry.

Shell-shocked, Teutonic fathers made
these boys take on the strangest traits--
one had this thing for wizards' hats,
the other catnapped with his cats--

but only Vegas could create
the weirdest magic show to date,
where the Ringling Brothers meets
Wagner with a disco beat.

The only natural act, applause,
was not for ice-white grace, but jaws
that could have snapped, that could have chewed.
We clapped for what you didn't do.

Then plastic-titted girls appeared
from their cocoons of smoke and mirrors
and you were trap-doored off the stage:
why do we wonder at your rage?

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
on billboards in the desert night:
those pompadours, mascaraed eyes
so queerly framed thy symmetry.

AM Villanelle: A Pastoral

*"These are just simple farmers; these are people of the land,
the common clay of the New West. You know...morons."*

--The Waco Kid, Blazing Saddles

**Good afternoon, this is The Trading Post.
For the next half hour, I'll take your calls.
Today, Mark's sick, so I'm your host.**

**(This is the job I hate the most.
I curse Mark, curse these padded walls.)**

Good afternoon, you're on The Trading Post.
*Am I on? Yes. I've got a pan to roast
A turkey in, three Chevy rims, three antique dolls...*

*...Where's Mark at? Sick today, so I'm the host.
Oh. I've got some baby clothes, a fishing boat
I want three hundred for, and they can call
3-2-0-4...*

...Am I on Trading Post?
Yes, ma'am, you are. *Well, I don't want to boast,
But I've got triplet grandkids, and they're all
three today...*

*...Hey, where's the usual host
At? Sick. Oh. I'm looking to buy a goat
and sell a Bob Knight basketball...*

**Good afternoon, you're on The Trading Post.
Today, Mark's sick, so I'm your host.**

A Description of the Morning

after Jonathan Swift

Now here outside Link's Bar a Yellow Cab
Sits idly coughing as Link pads a tab.
Now Betty Schroenke at the Koffee Kup
Flips on the sign just as the cops pull up.
The mayor's wife pulls out from Belter's Inn,
Whose records say she's never once checked in.
Now Mexicans in dirty jumpsuits hide
The joint they pass while waiting for their ride.
And as the local AM station blares
The latest prices on pork belly shares,
The reporter makes her way down to the jail
And meets her brother, who is posting bail.
The whistles at the factories shriek as hordes
Of third-shift workers curse their sleepy Fords.
The Baptist preacher changes his marquee
to read: "GET TO HEAVEN ON YOUR KNEES"
And schoolboys trudge to bus stops, kicking dirt
as schoolgirls roll the waistbands of their skirts.

Little Song: The Argument

If your love's not for me, then tell me so.
Dear God, how can I make you understand?
You know that I can take it. I'm a man.
I've tried and tried and tried. Are you just slow?
If that's what's true, then tell me, and I'll go.
I love you, but I just don't think I can
Go on like this, what with the way you are, and
Love you as you love me, which you know
Well--I can't. If it's what's wrong with me
Is what you want, it's just the way I'm made,
It's who I am, and I can say so be
Like that. I tell you the truth; I don't play
Like that. If you don't love me, set me free.
Otherwise--just let me know today.

Untitled

Three beat-up milk crates of young-adult schlock,
Seven editions of Benjamin Spock,
Two Gideon Bibles, some Harlequin sleaze,
The Common Diseases of New England's Trees,
"4-H Woodworking--How to Build Shelves",
The New (and the old) *Our Bodies, Ourselves*,
Hamlet, *The Jungle*, *The Sum of All Fears*,
Pat Boone's Guide to Your Teenage Years,
The Book of Mormon, Franz Kafka, John Donne,
Catch-22, "The Battle's Been Won--
Will You Accept Christ?", *Curing the "NO!s"*
In Your Two-Year-Old, rows upon rows
Of Time-Life repair books, "Applying for Visas,"
Someone, somewhere, was a Hare Krishna,
Paradise Lost, *Weight Loss Secrets Found!*,
One missal in Latin, *Notes from Underground*,
The Rules, *The Fountainhead*, *The Works of Graham Greene*,
Some Danielle Steele novels, (but nothing obscene
By Lawrence's been donated, just *Sons and Lovers*),
I'm OK; You're OK, We're Not Our Mothers,
Ten *Methodist Hymnals*, an assorted mix
Of Baltic state guidebooks from '76,
Color Me Beautiful, *Gone with the Wind*,
What Should We Think of Original Sin?,
Golden Books, chewed-on books, books about weaning,
Beowulf, *In His Steps*, *Man's Search for Meaning*,
"Cliff's Notes on *Deliverance*", *The Big Book of Cats*,
Side Effects, *Native Son*, *The 500 Hats*
Of Bartholomew Cubbins, *The Bell Jar*, *Horses:*
Castration and Breeding, "Citing from Sources",
"God's Plan for Your Life: Have You Heard the Call?"

And the scary thing is, I consider them all.

Lover's Leap

Fifteen years, four kids, you return to Lookout Mountain. Chattanooga has changed, but where you spent your wedding night hasn't, only aged like billboards from boyhood:

**"ONLY 711 MILES TO
GO! SEE SEVEN STATES FROM ROCK CITY!"** Clear fall days like yesterday, a good third of Dixie spreads out before you.

This is what, in truth, you'd spent adolescence longing after, though you did not yet know it. Jonesville, Indiana, so long on corn and short on most other

romance and pornography, could, however, offer hints of loveliness coming up, if only you went farther. You lean against the rail without looking.

Regional Transit Authority

Along St. Charles, that evening sun goes down.
The fog-glassed streetlamps quiver into use.
As suits make (stop and start) their way Uptown
beneath the gypsied oaks, two girls in loose
blue smocks--young conscripts of the Sacred Heart--
skip shrieking something about juice or zoos;
they're gone as quickly as the traffic starts.
Just past the synagogue, two lank-tressed wives
jog listlessly behind their hammocked carts
that overflow with socks and slumbering lives.
Night falls. The termites swarm. The final rays
flash out across the Crescent City's scythe,
which glistens only for this hour each day.
A couple kisses on the neutral ground.
Lord, I do not understand your ways.

Palm Sunday, St. Louis Cathedral, New Orleans

Behind a presence only felt as loss,
the tabernacle shuts up and leaves
the priest to do his work, to make Christ real
among the offered bits of bread and wine;
the Mexicans to count their beads; the kids
to roam among the pious tourists'
whispering. I can't receive today. I depart
whispering, "I can't receive today." I depart
to roam among the pious tourists;
the Mexicans to count their beads and kids
among the offered bits of bread and wine,
the priest to do his work. To make Christ real,
the tabernacle shuts up and leaves
behind a presence only felt as loss.

Pregnant Tourist at Mausoleum of Yellow Fever Victims

Cypress Grove Cemetery, New Orleans

She wonders if this is his resting place,
that boy in the museum (deflated chest
and sweat-soaked sheets) whose oil-streaked, skullish face
stares down now-dead photographers and death.

Here, miles away from drunken, bead-decked crowds,
the caterpillars drop down from the trees
to sting the unwary and spin their shrouds.
At the crumbling Chinese vault the breeze
lifts children's ashy prayers, rings small bells.
She thinks about his mother, paying for
that portrait of her nine-year-old. *Da en'*
udda line! the Canal streetcar driver yells.
She shivers, sweats. Her baby turns. The doors
of tombs swell from the rot contained within.

Iscariot's Bender

I can't remember what I yelled as I
flung back those thirty coins. Perhaps it was,
"Return my Lord!", more likely, "Shove it up
your ass!" That done, I combed Jerusalem
in search of saving wine. My Israel
ignored the pleasantries of being rude
to traitors. Vendors hawked and beggars begged
and I, drunk, sat watching God stand trial.
If it were you, and your cracked soul so used,
your sin that brought this Christ to death, could you
atone or comprehend the grand design?
Can you condemn the thing I did? Of course
not. Only God can damn, forgive, redeem...
and God was good as dead. I wish that I
had not been born. How could I understand
my part? I only saw the Roman nails.
I should have, could have waited two more days--
I would have seen the Lamb grown fat. Instead,
I make my hell. I dull my nerves against
themselves. I keep my arms from groping for
the branch above. I sway. I die. I play
the saint who hears the prayers of those who fail
at just one thing--those who forget or just
don't know you can't redeem such lives, once sold.

Boy with *The Cyclone*

Crystal Beach, Ontario, August 31, 1939

And while you lie in bed tonight,
you'll vibrate with the ratcheting of trains
climbing, pausing, tipping, dropping through heights

not merely twisted but actually sprained.
Your head will rack and rumble with screams
of happy travelers. The Depression wanes

around you all. Today, you're what, fourteen?
(The woman with you is your mother, say?
Perhaps your older sis?) How real you seem.

How real *The Cyclone* seems. How real the way
its cars are captured, just about to fall.
The left side of your shirt's untucked today,

and will still be forever. After all,
you're just an unnamed boy before the tracks
of a roller coaster, caught in a lull

before *The Cyclone*. White and gray and black
will fade away and change to tan. The hills
and dips won't last. And you? Only the clack

of chain lifts echoes, a triumph of the will
of your photographer, who must delight
in all things bent and scenes of motion stilled.

Kentucky Nocturne #1

In paths that glister like a bridal train,
she leaves her breath behind. He starts the car,
or rather, curses, pumps, and tries again.
I watch them from upstairs. Off to some bar
in Richmond, I've no doubt. I bite my tongue.
She knows how I got her. What else is there
to do? She won't listen, but, she's young
and that's how Jenny is. She cut her hair
down to the scalp when she was four, that red
I dye for now. And when I asked just what
she did that for, do you know what she said?
"For me." Well, since then I've done nothing but
pretend that I believe whatever lie
she says. At least this time she waves goodbye.

Kentucky Nocturne #7

I wait out on the porch. Up near the light,
bats flirt and find their food. I sit and shake
the water from my ears. Thank God the lake's
nearby enough--they'll all sleep good tonight.

The screen door clicks--it's Pearl, my youngest. Red
hair plastered down with sweat, she mumbles things
that I don't hear. Just four, already swings
her hips while walking, says what's best unsaid.

I take her back inside, slap bugs
that slurp my tired blood, and wonder how
those rings around the moon can promise rain
that doesn't come. I used to think that slugs
just glode. I watch them melt their bellies now,
in paths that glister like a bridal train.

Hell's Lullaby

for Tabatha Miller

The only thing you've left for me to do--
carrying you outside, some forty pounds
of gnawing, clawing rage and bruising shoes

now halfway hanging, halfway held around
my neck and stilled to sobbing. Tabby, little beast,
how many times must we pace this frozen ground?

Around us, blue-black mountains, holler-creased,
ooze icy, dirty tears from man-made cracks
while impassable roads and houses pieced

out of whatever cling to their backs
and sides. Behind, still other mountains, caught
between Kentucky, quiet skies. Trees clap

their glassy branches as the moon burns hot.
I'll love my own as much and more than you
someday. I pray to not.

High Board

for Myca Carr

You turn to me from the school bus window
streaked with Kentucky rain
and ask if I have ever been afraid
to do something I couldn't fail at
because I knew I wouldn't fail

and I'm startled into recognition:

the summer I turned eight--
drought year,
family swim from six to nine in the evenings,

Sam Cooke on the loudspeaker,
and the bats jerking in and out
of the mosquito clouds around the lamps.

That was before they added the slanted ladder,
and before they took the high board out
altogether (insurance reasons),

so if you were so inclined
you had to climb some ten odd feet
straight up

till you were on a level
with the roof of the bathhouse.

Of course, since you were still
a little girl, you could
turn around
and no one would think the less of you
(and your mother isn't watching anyway),

and it is these things
that make anything but
striding to the edge
a clean impossibility.

You've dove before,
hundreds of times
from the sides and low boards--
there's no question of mere jumping

or of a panicked belly-smack.

Your spine will hold itself
and your limbs will snap into place
so that you'll pierce the surface like a needle
no real splash
just a thread of empty space dragging behind you
that the water rushes in to fill
and you'll surface in your own sweet place and time.

Melanoma

Medically speaking,
as close a tissue match
as any brother and sister. We were
in the beginning, are now,
and ever shall be The Kids. Don't kid
yourself: never
separate entities, not during those
summers when I'd hit you
or you'd hit me
and we'd both get belted
I've often thought
of you as my mirror
or I yours, but
that's not an accurate reflection.
The sun always bleached you
like the diapers-turned-dustrags
sagging from the clothesline.
Sometimes from the doorway,
I'd spy on your Bavarian face
and translucent hair
as Mom sang
You Are My Sunshine,
My Only Sunshine.
I'd marvel at how you bent
the laws of physics:
the more light you absorbed,
the more you reflected;
the more you reflected,
the more you absorbed.
Light has never done that for me.
I burn, and when I heal,
I'm not dark and alluring.
just jaundiced.
Still, I follow you, trying
to lighten my hair
and darken my skin
off your reflected rays.
So far, all they've given me
are split ends and spots,
one of which
the doctor wants to biopsy.
I tell you this because
the other night,

as I lay sleeping,
I dreamt I held you in my arms
and choked you.
I woke and realized
you must still live,
because I do.
You see, we are unequal halves
of the same being.
If you die, I die also.
You are my life support.
I am your cancer.

Foucalt Sestina / Field Trip to the State Museum

for Zane Lubber, 1979-2003, and Chrissy Ostendorf, 1980-2006

From the glass dome's center, above the circular balconies, up
above our heads, the pendulum swung straight while
we would stare, happy, nauseous, earthbound children
like so many other children in Indianapolis.
We'd watch as the pendulum drew near,
as its needle would topple a peg, as it would grow

distant, as it would spring back, grow
near again. Our eyes would travel up
the cable to the swiveling pivot which seemed so near
the sky, and we'd race up spiral stairs while
beneath the pendulum, Indianapolis
swiveled. Mere children,

and since we were children,
on days like those, we were never told to grow
even though the rest of Indianapolis
was. So we would race up
the State Museum's spiral stairs while
our chaperones yelled, and while the pendulum drew near,

we'd hang backwards over balconies to be near
the pivoting sky, children
nauseous on earthbound legs, pegs toppling while
our chaperone's voices grew dim
even as they mounted spiral stairs up
to a fourth-floor balcony in Indianapolis.

We would swivel with the rest of Indianapolis,
the straight-swinging pendulum as near
to otherworldly as anything we might dream up.
Why else as children
be fascinated by the distant toppling of pegs, which grow
louder and more numerous all the while?

In the meanwhile, we swivel while
and with the rest of Indianapolis
and topple in our circles and grow
apart or maybe near
again, still earthbound children,
while near Indianapolis, children grow up.

Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico, 1941

Ansel Adams must have been a prophet.
He alone yelled to stop the car,
his hands shaking
as he fumbled with the tripod.

When the shutter clicked that afternoon,
it was not the moon's rising before
but the sun's setting behind
that made the tombstones flare.

The houses and barns
were not yet realized as ghostly tents
pitched against the harshness.

The view was shattered
beyond its genesis of light and dark
into the refractions
of pink and blue and green
and brown and lilac
and all the other colors
that distract and detract
from the ordained landscape:

the world in shades of gray,
the details as background,
and the settlement on the desert floor
as an imperfect reflection
of the brilliant blackness above.

Vita

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