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Swan-Diving at the Milan Lounge

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Swan-Diving at the Milan Lounge

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

by

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B.A. University of California Santa Barbara, 1976
M.A. San Francisco State University, 1980

December 2006

Dedication

To Mom and Dad.
Without whose support none of this would have been possible.
May you truly rest in peace.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my dear husband, Jim, for teaching me the language of love and rhetoric. I would also like to thank John Gery, Kay Murphy, and John Hazlett for their inspiration, patience, and diligence. I am eternally grateful that, to misquote Groucho Marx, they would be willing to sit on a committee that would have me as a member. And of course I am grateful to the cast of thousands who have touched my life: poets, mentors, family, friends, journalists, drunks, comics, stick people, Cubs, Korbel Champagne, ex-lovers, horses, cats, gimps, etc. Also, I am indebted to the Milan Lounge without whose libations none of this would have been possible.

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Preface

“It is Disneyland that is authentic here!”

– Jean Baudrillard, *America*

“Reality is an illusion that occurs due to lack of alcohol.”

– Anonymous

Swan-Diving at the Milan Lounge is my swan-song of poems about the marginalized habits of the hyper-real nightmare of the American dream that is ground zero for the inauthentic. The poems are lyric paeans to drunks, stick people, derelicts, and gimps, whose alcoholism, disabilities, infirmities, and very existence act as creative subterfuge of society’s simulacra. Like the poet, they live beyond the pale of the socially acceptable. As deviants from the mainstream, their flaws, absurdities, and bizarre behaviors are what make them performance artists of the authentic, whose being undermines and parodies the Disneyfication of reality and the media’s pimping of the trite as news.

Therefore, my poems focus on the drunks and stick people (figures drawn from circles and lines) whose flawed, absurd existence and gestures can actually become venues for the authentic. When the “B-girl / musters the moxie to / swan-dive off a bar stool,” the ontology of her act, even if seemingly absurd, is a leap of faith releasing her from the straitjacket of the so-called normal world. The poem’s imagery invokes dark humor to implode the shallowness of life as a day-time soap opera. I attempt to transform the absurdity of her leap off a bar stool into a gesture of poetic resonance that disrupts the artificiality of Dr. Disney’s computer-generated special effects masquerading as reality. By *reality* I mean what Charles Peirce meant when he said that “what really is ultimately consists in what shall be forced upon us in experience” (243). Despite philosophical and semiotic discussions of many kinds of “realities,” including “virtual reality,” there is the undeniable pragmatism of living-dying existence. What is real in any particular case may be difficult to determine, but that difficulty does not justify emptying *reality* of its

traditional meaning. Without the concept of *reality* as something different from mere opinion, the notions of *correction* and *improvement* also lose their meaning. Of course, some do deny *reality* in theory, but no one can practice that theory. The drunk can avoid reality only for a time.

The irony is that the concept of pragmatic, empirical reality is becoming suspect due to its erasure by simulacra, the media, and virtual reality. Hence the need for the absurd to articulate the authentic. As Søren Kierkegaard wrote in his journals, “The Absurd, or to act by virtue of the absurd, is to act upon faith.” The barfly’s swan-dive into the cut-crystal whiskey tumbler is a leap of faith through the absurd into meaning that counters the Disneyfied hyper reality which, as Jean Baudrillard defines it, is “more real than the real.” For me, the B-girl is like the poet whom Lawrence Ferlinghetti describes as “constantly risking absurdity / and death.” As such these flawed characters are truly human, worthy of life in my poems. Their flaws imbue them with a poetic reality antithetical to society’s ubiquitous, trite happy talk that trivializes and commodifies experience into sound bites, and stereotypes. Just how far fetched is Armageddon as a game show? Whenever “Cyberspace’s Mary Poppins / dishes sugared dirt” about how soccer moms can survive the end of the world, I see the triumph of simulacra. Hence the need of the drunks and derelicts, in other words, poetic voices, to dissipate the smoke and mirrors of hyper reality. The poetry of drunks and derelicts can unmask the insidious fascism of such denizens of political correctness as the Health Nazis who, unchecked, would round up the grotesquely obese (read any marginalized group) and render them into “tubs of lard.”

Whether it’s the B-girl diving off a bar stool or John Berryman jumping off the Washington Avenue Bridge, such leaps of faith into death and the unknown constitute a bloody truth underlying the sugar-coated artifice of merchandised experience. Suicide isn’t nice-nice but it’s real. My poetry often aligns with Berryman’s alienation in *The Dream Songs*: “The world is gradually becoming a place / where I do not care to be any more.”

By risking absurdity, the drunks, lunatics, homeless, cripples, and misanthropes in my poems seek fragmented meaning even if it is trying to find the “face of Jesus inside a jar of Mira-

cle Whip.” Therein poetry may offer some solace. In “Street-Corner Theology,” poet Charles Simic states: “The disorder of the city is sacred... We are fragments of an unutterable whole. Meaning is always in search of itself.” Both in their subject matter and in their sometimes gnarled form, my poems are attempting to articulate that unutterable “meaning in search of itself.” They are voices for the authentic in the American wasteland of meaninglessness.

I have divided my thesis into three parts. Part one, “One Won’t Hurt” (taken from a sign at Johnny White’s Bar during an AA convention), deals with drunks as authentic responders to the meaningless babble of happy talk. Drinking is translated into art. The first section chronicles the demise of the artist through booze with those “Memorex Moments in the Drunk Tank.” The section ends with John Berryman’s leap off the Washington Avenue Bridge: “*Pick a demise, Mr. Bones, any demise.*” For me, suicide becomes a leap of faith into darkness and as such rips apart simulacra with the very real corpse of the artist.

The second section, “Broken Levees and Baseball,” is an intermezzo between the drunks and the stick people. It concerns the poet’s search for meaning within the horror and chaos of broken levees. Baseball as an art offers form, logic, and hope as an alternative to the ruin of broken levees. Whereas sound bites and happy talk offer no comfort in the face of catastrophe, baseball offers hope. The poems segue between baseball’s “Friendly Confines” where a balloonist might just reverse the “Cub’s curse/ of the black cat in the batter’s box” and the broken levee’s “Lethe of rotting garbage.” For me, baseball itself is an island of hope in a sea of ruin. In a hyper-real society, the culture of catastrophe is reduced to Kathleen Blanco action figures. On the other hand, the heroics of a one-hand pitcher throwing a no-hitter illustrate the triumph of hope and meaning over devastation and chaos. Unlike a hurricane, baseball is played within a set of rules and framework antithetical to chaos even though it is only a game. Yet, baseball transcends its propensity towards simulation and simulacra through the reality of its players and fans who appreciate artifice as artifice.

In the final section, “Stick People at the Magic Kingdom,” I deal with the stick people’s

search for meaning within America's fantasy land. For the drunks, bars serve as theaters of meaning. For the victims of the broken levees, at least at the Milan Lounge in New Orleans, a Chicago Cubs bar, baseball offers a nostalgic form and potential significance. For the stick people, America is the Magic Kingdom where we as a nation have composed a shorthand for humanity scripted through marketing, media, and our own complacency into the dramaturgy of the banal and meaningless happy talk. The stick people are the trompe l'oeil of ourselves made of circles and lines. Yet as caricatures of ourselves, they voice meaning through their inherently absurd existence and fragmented selves. Sardonic humor becomes a poet's weapon against drivel. Whether it's the "Bell of Amherst" at an Airstream Convention, "*dog-faced Diogenes*" masturbating on Mr. Toad's wild ride, or Baudrillard's "Used Car Salesman," satire becomes a subversive weapon to ridicule our Disneyfied existence. The section ends with a mortality that, while absurd, is not meant as inauthentic. I hope the reader may nod in understanding to the grim absurdity of Death playing video poker at the "Enchanted Tiki Room" as emblematic of the human condition.

Swan-Diving at the Milan Lounge relies on lyric free verse to speak a cosmos of voices and fragments. Most of the poems construct a persona/character grounded in the poem's context. Beyond that, I intend in each poem to fuse Imagism's precision and exactness, Surrealism's subconscious and phantasmagoric imagery, Absurdism's incongruity, and social commentary's satire and parody into a poetics capable of handling my poetic concerns. Therefore, I am amenable to any poetic tools that will help impart my characters' voices: image, symbol, oxymoron, humor, invective, satire, clichés, sound bites, jingoism, drivel, and babble. Whatever can facilitate poetic meaning amidst pervasive hype is appropriate, including the use of meaningless consumer rhetoric as weaponry to implode such meaninglessness.

Besides Simic's text, the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Ed Dorn, and Sylvia Plath, and the theoretical work of Baudrillard have all had an impact on my work. I admire Williams' ruthless Imagism and poetic clarity. His greatness is in his ability to find the "radiant gist" within a red wheelbarrow or a figure five. This ability to discern the "radiant gist" within the dung heap

of simulacra is what frees the poet to unearth meaning in a meaningless world. Poet Ed Dorn, whom Eirik Steinhoff, editor of the *Chicago Review*, has called an “American Heretic,” is a master of incisive, acerbic, sardonic commentary and an unflinching critic of trivial banality and insipid political correctness. His insight into pornographic consumer culture is essential to any poetic salvation from cultural simulacra. Dorn’s poetics were the poetics of humanity as opposed to the happy talk of machines, and his collection *Abhorrences* epitomizes his assessment of America’s hyper reality. In “Not So Hard Wired, but something to do” Dorn writes, “Recusants who never wrote / a damn line in their smug lives /... Now regularly bathe / in the gangrene glow / of Crosstalk and Smartcom / like a herd of gallsick cattle” (39). Also, Plath’s use of suicide as art has shaped my concern with alcoholic demise as a poetic expression. Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” expresses this: “Dying / is an art” (520). In addition, I also am indebted to Baudrillard’s poetic prose, whose sonic descriptions and point-blank critiques of America have helped me see the Hitler behind the Mickey Mouse mask. Baudrillard wars against the commodification of meaning into shrink-wrapped sound bites through his poetic hyperbole, irony, and exaggeration. The poetic overkill of Baudrillard’s insights are effective in attacking the insidious ubiquity of simulacra. You don’t use toy guns to fight nuclear weapons. In *America*, Baudrillard writes: “Astral America. The lyrical nature of pure circulation... Joy in the collapse of metaphor... The exhilaration of obscenity, the obscenity of obviousness, the obviousness of power, the power of simulation” (27).

Despite my mentors, I refuse to pigeonhole my poetry in any particular school or style. Instead I prefer to create a five-ring circus of styles. The short lyric is the ring-master for those various poetic styles. Within the lyric form, some of my poems are surreal set pieces peppered with satiric commentary about America blighted by “Mr. Potato Heads” or prom queens in duct tape gowns. Others are grim tone poems, such as the one about Berryman’s demise in Las Vegas or the other on cell phones ringing near body parts at Sleeping Beauty Castle. Some use the *National Inquirer* style to portray mom imprisoned in the “firebombed Dresden” inside her head or Frosty the Snowman playing baseball in the Cactus League. Others satirize a generation of Bar-

bies speaking perfect “broken English.” Ultimately, my work is concerned with the dark comedy of the human condition. When I ask, “How many light bulbs does it take to change a drunk?” I am not being absurd.

Finally, Simic writes in *Orphan Factory*: “There’s a tradition of wonderful misfits in literature, unclassifiable writers and poets.... Only a style that is a carnival of styles seems to please them. A poetry, in short, that has the feel of the circus, a sideshow, vaudeville, facts stranger than fiction, fake miracles and superstitions, dream-books sold at supermarket counters, etc.” (96). My misfits are the drunks, stick people, and gimps swimming against the flood of the trite.

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Part One: One Won't Hurt

"Constantly risking absurdity and death... the poet like an acrobat
climbs... to a high wire of his own making."

—Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Swan-Diving at the Milan Lounge

Evenings, the B-girl
musters the moxie to
swan-dive off a bar stool
at the Milan Lounge

for nickels tossed
into the tin cup
of an organ grinder's monkey.
Fledgling Leda molts

her black silk cape,
climbs rung by rung
until she reaches the torn naugahyde platform.
Swaying in the heights,
she lifts a finger to test

the maduro whiff
of cigars and Jungle Gardenia,
wafting up from mere mortals.
Then she lifts her arms, poises

on tiptoes
for her plunge
into the cut-crystal whiskey tumbler
placed strategically in the sawdust
and peanut shell bedlam.

The vanishing smile.
A Bronx cheer erupts.

Wunnerful, Wunnerful

Out for a night of easy
listening to the magic of Puff's
Oompah Band
during Nostalgia Night at

the Corn Palace:
Phantoms take off and land
from the crew cuts of battery-
powered war hawks, twisting a go-
go as they spastically pump
their pacemakers.

I am dressed to kill, wearing nothing
but a flaming gown of
incendigel, slit to the thigh.
Most of the time, I dance cheek to
cheek with a post-mortem,
a poster boy for Special Ops
leashed to an oxygen tank,

wheezing. Between numbers,
CBS's Dan Rather reports live
from the Demilitarized Zone how Asian
carp are flying up the Missouri
into the faces of good ol'
boys in bass boats.
The horror, weeps a jar head
shaking off a flashback, as Charlie
hawks bottled water from the Mekong Delta.

As the night draws to an end,
I float across the ballroom floor, whispering
Doesn't it take you back
to Lawrence Welk and his Hotsy Totsy Boys
live from Vietnam
when Myron Floren played his
squeeze-box rendition of
"I've Got You Under My Skin?"

Twinkle toes, my partner beams
about my maimed foot dragged
bleeding through smashed champagne glass.

Memorex Moments in the Drunk Tank

One won't hurt.

Make mine a Wellbutrin cocktail, shaken not stirred.

Dixie cups of Jell-O shots.

How are we today?

Another lost weekend in the Hooch Hotel.

I got busted by the vice squad's booze hound.

Hope you got lush money for bail.

Someone should slap a gag order on your felony juice.

Well at least I served my country in the smashed unit.

Who does she think she is, Bloody Rambo in knickers?

Don't try this at home. Leave it to the professionals.

How many light bulbs does it take to change a drunk?

This is a disease of perception. How many fingers am I holding up?

Spare me the rhetoric.

I prefer the Latin—ipsomaniac.

Hope is rotgut.

I haven't had this much fun since the pigs ate my kid brother.

Did you check the bumper for blood?

Irish Need Not Apply

A bunch of Irish drunks are holding a Good Friday wake for Jesus at the Milan Lounge. There's whiskey in the jar. They're singing "God bless America" and "Danny Boy" when a drunk atheist loudly interrupts:

"The only god to bless America is Hasbro Toys, erecting 6-foot-tall Mr. Potato heads at all national parks and historic sites. Instead of by Lincoln, Gettysburg has been consecrated by an enormous Spud Light. Mr. Rotunda Head has been carved alongside the presidents into Mount Rushmore. And we've got an incumbent Mr. Cash Potato in the White House. Who but the Irish to better understand the nefarious implications of gargantuan, inedible Potato Heads promoting our famine culture of brain dead?"

After a few moments, Paddy Reilly answers:

"By Jaysus, he's right! Yez want Stations of the Cross? Sure, I'm a langered jackeen. But I'm tellin' yez, the feck-all gov's bleedin' reign of fun got it in fer every one of us gobshites, crop dustin' us with the blight from the Great Hunger like. Wait 'til yez see Micks dyin' by the thousands along the road side, eatin' grass. And not a Big Fella in sight."

Three Days AWOL

We yawn at attention
in hospital-issue fatigues
at early morning roll call,
three days AWOL
from the time-
lapse mortality of our last drunk.

Oblivious to the hidden cameras
filming us scratching our balls,
we're scruffy, detox recruits
in basic training, locked down
on the chemical dependency unit.

The monitors are scrutinized by our
Carrie Nation Drill Sergeant
encamped in the
bullet-proof nurses' station
until a leatherneck
war-hoops *semper fi*,
then hurls feces at a psych tech
who tackles the howling patient,
muscling him into a straitjacket.

Our head nurse storms down the hall
for some sound-off
about how we're whiners, sissy men,
too busy nursing our hangovers
to pull ourselves up by our boot straps
back onto the wagon. Playing God, she thinks
she can strong-arm us sober
with curses and temperance hatchet.
Like, yeah sure, *jails, institutions, death*.

Nevertheless, her goons
blindfold the drooling Marine
and stand him up naked
before a firing squad of hypodermic needles.

Trolling the Void

Homeless eyes slide down a banister to the sidewalk where eggs fry sunnyside up. This is la la land. Happy hour all day. Heaven negotiates an uneasy peace between razor blades and the ubiquitous *purple haze*. If *i/you* steps outside, *i/you* risks the fist of night. Downwind of lightning, catastrophe cruises the alleys dolled up in pop beads and a MoonPie bra. *I/you* carry our entrails as if they were clouds. *It/they* promise mood candy if *i/you* ignores the bruises. *It/they* threaten electroshock if *i/you* bitches about lockdown.

South of the border, down Mexico way. Is it goodbye so soon? Take the 13th floor elevator to the brimstone dealership for lost souls. That kind of talk can get a person killed. Yes, but burying the dead, isn't that what *we/all* are doing? Let the dead bury the dead on Sundays, during visiting hours. *I/you* knows how to rearrange the Titanic's deck chairs. *I/you* sets the atomic clock to *Days of Our Lives*. Trigger-happy *it/they* would sooner shoot *i/you* than throw *i/you* in the drunk tank. *I/you* dumpster-dives for dollar bills. *I/you* plays tag with trucks. *You/I* fold jigsaw body parts into origami birds.

Infinity Bus Stop

*It's this damn waiting
that grinds your lights out!*

growled the lame lush
vacuum packed into his wheel chair, Old Sparky,

parked under the sign of the cross
at the Infinity Bus Stop.

Every morning he waits for the city omnibus
to get his ticket punched

for his ring-side seat to the Second Coming
after being sidelined by a Baghdad landmine.

He takes a swig of Thunderbird.
Don't give me the lucky-to-be-alive shit.

His flame-thrower eyes ignite,
scorching burgers inside a bombed-out jeep.

*The next bus is due in 15 minutes
but I wouldn't hold my breath .*

Van Gogh Gin

“La tristesse durera toujours”
—Van Gogh

The clink of ice rouses the artist,
drinking alone inside a yellow house,
from drowning in the starry cosmos
at the bottom of a chilled martini glass
to stare at the logo of a bloody ear
plastered on a frosted spirit bottle
behind the barmaid.
Indeed, it amuses him enough to light a pipe
and scratch his bandaged head
as he considers more than 8,000 ways
to mix up Dutch courage
and mutters
something about *the wages of gin*,
something about *cutting off an ear*,
something about *eating paint*,
something about *a signed proof*,
something about *a signature martini*,
almost as famous as
God’s face on a Wheaties box.

Beethoven's Mr. Bones Symphony:

For John Berryman in Las Vegas

So celebrate with them on New Year's Eve,
blowing up the Sands Hotel
through implosion.
And for my nothings, cherished friends,
I detonate another bender braying down the strip,
noisemaker 'I' in Irish handcuffs.

And so staggers Henry, flush
bent on ruin into the Four Queens.
Bells-and-whistles Circe calls
him over to the one-armed bandit's
promised jackpot. And so gulps drowning Henry
his shots, sounding the stick people's babble.

But, Henry, isn't that why we came,
touchy-feely dilettantes groping for doomsday
here in the desert? A high-stakes 52-pick-up,
our odds shuffled into a loaded deck? Seems
only yesterday when Henry, joker wild, swan-
songed off the Washington Avenue Bridge.

*Pick a demise, Mr. Bones, any demise.
Free drinks on the rocks.*

Part Two: Broken Levees and Baseball

GeT U SuM

Too many crackups at the hit-and-run package store means another sleepless night telephoning the fish frozen belly up in the Lethe of rotting garbage. Along the shore, an army of bush leaguers have bivouacked for the winter. They are the dream team of the future, dead men with game faces. The specters of Black Sox players regale them from the other side. In the distance, a mangy dog howls, electrocuted by power lines. The cheap thrill of the eternal second. A scoreboard shows the ninth inning. The recruits shiver around campfires burning almanacs and scouting reports. They eat meager rations of baloney and Bunny Bread sandwiches. The first baseman plays the *12th of Never* out of tune on a harmonica. The catcher cannibalizes himself out of boredom. The designated hitter holds his pecker like a microphone, performing stand-up comedy. His punch lines laugh themselves to death in the snow. A spotlight projects a holograph of George Washington in a boat, floating across a flooded baseball diamond, onto the starless night sky. His men call him *Blue*. He wears a face mask, shin guards, and he calls strikes.

They are dreaming of a white Christmas when the charnel orchids bloom and of spring training when Frosty the Snowman plays in the Cactus League.

No Joy in Mudville

The lard-ass from Jersey schleps
her middle-age spread in FEMA blue hot pants
next to the pimply-faced rubber-necker from Peoria,
repeating, *Man, this is better than reality TV.*

They have paid good money for their front-seat,
three-hour look-see through no-man's-land
on the Hurricane Katrina Tour,
ferried by an air-conditioned replica
of the yellow school buses
stranded during rescue efforts.

Costumed as a New Orleans cop,
the tour guide points out
shrunken heads and bloated corpses
littering the 9th Ward,
rotting in the muck, swarming with coffin flies
near a ruined dugout spray-painted, *Mudville Nine inside.*

The highlight of the tour?
An actor playing Mighty Casey
at the bat, knee-deep in sludge,
who strikes out, then blows his brains out
in front of his gutted Lakeview home.
The tourists *ooh and aah*
at the lifelike replica of carnage,
tastefully Disneyfied through tinted windows.

As the tour bus pulls into the lot
back at the Convention Center,
young Latinos hand out Kathleen Blanco
action figures as souvenirs: Pull the string.
She calls for a day of prayer.
It's a small world after all.

Caught Napping

The storied tradition of ringing in
New Year with gunfire
in the “city that care forgot”
returned with a bang

when a former Marine, a survivor
of flurries of Viet Cong shrapnel now moonlighting
as a housing inspector, popped a bottle of bubbly
with his new squeeze from the Outer Banks.

Sitting on a broken levee by the Big Muddy,
they were stargazing through the dirty fog
at starbursts of fireworks
when suddenly a renegade pistol’s *pop, pop, pop*

blew his spine to smithereens.
Oh, well, just another loblolly
lulled by the post-calamity calm
into thinking a disaster could really change anything.

Lucky Dogs

Even for porn star John Holmes,
remarkably endowed with
what polite company refers to,
blushingly, as the spear of destiny,
stepping on one's dick
is an anatomical impossibility
except during the halcyon days
before Katrina ushered in the dead-ball era
when the Tulane Green Wave
rolled into the College Baseball World Series
with their hot bats, hullabaloo tailgaters, and gorilla ball,
hungry for monster brats—
the Midwest version of Lucky Dogs,
slathered with relish
served on a Sheboygan hard roll.
Finger lickin' good.

Sound of One Hand Clapping

*I just wanted to be the best pitcher I could be**

light years from the dung heap in Flint
where a fledgling

flamethrower

stared down sandlot brats
taunting

crab

now an anthem of
blistering fast balls

southpaw

sinkers &

curves

the *hurler*

digs into terra firma

brushes off Cleveland's
bulked-up bats & paints the plate

in chin music

a *gimp hack* pitching

goose eggs, his Labor

Day no-

hitter scalping

the Indians

shatters the radar gun

the sound of one hand

clapping

*James Abbot— major league pitcher born without a right hand.
On September 4, 1993, Abbott electrified Yankee Stadium
when he threw a no-hitter against the Cleveland Indians.

Divine Intervention at the Friendly Confines

On Epiphany,
Lawn Chair Man
floated
across the frozen abyss

of Wrigley Field
held aloft by
50 weather balloons
strapped to his lawn chair.

For despairing
Cubs fans, seeking sanctuary
at the Billy Goat Tavern
and Milan Lounge,
the spectacle of a beer-belly Zeppelin,
offering the baseball gods

Spam sandwiches and a six pack of *High Life*,
portended a pennant,
as surely as the Voodoo priestess
lifting the gris-gris off the Big Easy.

For too long,
the Windy City has weathered
winters of blood sacrifices:
— a Viagra smuggler hawked strychnine-laced erections
— a card dealer shot a man during strip poker
— a South Side secretary stabbed Zeno the Stoic

Surely, the balloonist's ascent to Mt. Airy
will reverse the Cubs' curse
of the black cat in the batter's box
and Socrates, the scapegoat.

Part Three: Stick People at the Magic Kingdom

Scarecrow

*Mother of God,
pull over!*

A stick man on a cross
leaning lopsided.

The Good Humor Man
of the New Testament
aspiring to human proportions
despite his burlap face,
eyes and mouth
sewn shut, turns out to be
a Popsicle Jesus, speechless
at the behest of the barnyard cat
trotting off with his tongue.

What joker
contrived this malapropism,
a raggedy man
crowned in thorns,
hung out for target practice,
strafed by blackbirds
and the lethal stares of rubbernecking farmers?

*Christ, this is North Dakota,
not the Magic Kingdom.*

Cosmic Vending Machine

The miracle of a coin-operated apparatus
that dispenses truth, justice & other junk food.

Twinkies suit the existentialist.
Payday feeds the pragmatist.
For the Platonist, Hostess Cupcakes' sugary quintessence.
Good and Plenty fattens prosperity followers.
Abba Zabba fuels Muslim extremists.
Zero candy for the nihilists.
Jawbreakers are chomped by feminists.
Gay libbers adore Blow Pops.
Dadaist's can't get enough of Whatchamacallit.
Fizzies fizzle for the postmodernists.
Hollywood bars are a hit with celebrity scientologists.
M&Ms sustain the Great Chain of Being.
Just when everything seems right
with the universe

here comes *dog-faced Diogenes* enfant terrible of the Cynosarges
fresh from soothsaying his *Johnson* during Mr. Toad's wild ride.

He smirks &
jerks a knob.

Plop of a Snicker's bar.

Duct Tape and Dinosaur Dung

300 million years before this prom queen
decked herself out in a duct-tape corsage and gown,
Holocaust-sized cockroaches scavenged leaf-
litter and dinosaur dung in the darkest heart
of what was once Pangea, now a coal mine in Ohio,
where after being bogged down since time immemorial
in the shell of what it used to be
a *Macropanesthia rhinoceros*
was recently unearthed.

Paleo-entomologists should never underestimate
the adhesive qualities of duct tape and fossilized mud
nor party animals the sheer indestructibility
of prom queens and cockroaches.

New Eden

In a garden of obsolescence,
we spent the better part of our tour
slumming it at Our Lady of Perpetual Junk theme park,

praying for the Maytag man
as we basked in the rarefied air
of broken nose-hair trimmers.

That Mr. Fix It
would be driven into the
wilderness with nothing more than a

30-day warranty to cover his mortal sin
distresses us. As God's chosen faithful,
crusading against conspicuous consumption,

we must soldier on resolute to
capture on film that precise instant
when a charismatic preacher lays hands

on the ruined chassis of a Waring blender.
For a moment, nothing. Then it whirrs in tongues.
Praise Jesus! We rush off to flash

the camera's image to the brethren back home
studying the *Resurrection Guide to Household Appliances*.
Faith has raised the Holy Ghost in the machine.

Death hath no more dominion over
a broken 8-track stereo, a stuck Magic Fingers massager,
a wheezing wireless broadcasting static.

Binary Breaking News

Cyberspace's Mary Poppins
dishes sugared dirt to

the canned audience
in streaming video

across the blank screen of death.
Snap, crackle, pop.

Some compare her to Helen of Troy—
the face that launched a thousand sound bytes.

Daughter of NASDAQ and Nemesis,
headquartered in Paris,

she markets a full line of personal care products:
Final Net, Sea Breeze, Time Block.

She also guest stars on *Good Morning America*,
featuring such mouth-watering recipes as Emeril's vampire meatloaf.

Backstage, after the show,
the heartless mega-pixel winks and grins.

Used Car Salesman:

For Jean Baudrillard

Channel surfing between
Gulf War (never happened) reruns
on the History channel,
the only place where history comes
alive because the real deal no longer exists,
and a six-pack of abs infomercials
awash in hard-body sirens,
in string bikinis, playing to the camera
for the soft-core porn junkies
hitting instant replay
again, and again, and again,

I tuned in to a used-car salesman
hyping a fully loaded Ford Pinto,
great gas mileage, sun roof,
cruise control, odometer that counts
backward, and exploding fuel tank.

What was noteworthy was not his spiel
*(We will not be undersold
zero percent down
rock-bottom prices
bring the pink slip
leave the kids at home
and a 90-day lease-back option
on black holes),*

but the cigar-smoking closer
sporting a jacket so loud
it triggered car alarms, and blew the doors
off the showroom models.
For 60 seconds, the showman screeched.
He jumped up and down.
He pounded the hood.
He kicked frantically the whitewalls.

Finally, I hit the mute button.

And, to think

such shenanigans could entice
actual citizens to trade in
their tattered vestiges of identity
for this shiny, airbrushed death trap
before buyer's remorse sets in.

Belle of Amherst at an Airstream Convention

When a reporter at Adventureland's
Wally Byam Caravan Club
asked the Belle of Amherst
how she felt about being selected
guest speaker for Airstream enthusiasts,
she quipped,

*Beauty crowds me till I die.
Mercy, elbow room, please.
Great White Paparazzi,
Just once let me step out of
Dawn's Silver Overlander
Like Botticelli's peroxide Venus,
Fig-leaf attired, free from sin,
As modesty's smile
Covers my nakedness
With a shit-eating grin.*

Where the Rubber Meets the Road

At the Nip-and-Tuck Goodyear Plant in Beverly Hills,
inner-tube lips are pumped with vulcanized rubber
so a generation of Barbies can speak broken English
impeccably over the cell phone
while at the same time attempting to drive to Needless Markup.

Indeed, plastic surgeons have built lucrative practices on the following facts:

- 1) Most *solikeyouknow* Ding Dongs can't parallel park and chew gum at the same time.
- 2) Mona Lisa facelifts for celebrity retreads are all the rage at Da Vinci Studio of Hollywood.

Fat Farm

The *raw/live food diet*
taken to the extreme has led to
the rounding up in cattle cars
of the obese, grotesquely shipped off to fat farms
by the Health Nazis shouting at their prisoners
Your body belongs to the nation!
Your body belongs to the Food Führer!
before the wholesale slaughter
to thin the herd.

Make no mistake:
A lean and mean genocide is being waged
by fit fascists along the fat front
whenever in the superheated spas
they render tubs of lard
from scientifically separated lipids and triglycerides
into lamp shades and scented candles
used to light the way
for the Superlite World Order
ruled by the Übermensch of gym rats.

Meteor Showers, or Things that Fall from the Sky

1.

Jettisoned on a cloudless day
from the Mother Ship,
Humpty Dumpty
freefalls into a frying pan
sunny side up.

2.

Rock-hard bird droppings
pelt Toontown. No one told
a bleeding Donald Duck
about the laws of gravity.

3.

Bombs over Baghdad
precipitate headless chicken littles
to panic amidst the barnyard apocalypse.
The sky is falling.

4.

Scream-spliced blips of starlight
are tracked on the radar screen
of the Milky Way
as they plummet towards Main Street
where upon impact
they incinerate into fire flowers.

5.

Up for grabs on eBay
after the space shuttle Columbia
son et lumiere breaks apart
is the charred astronaut's heart
tossed, by chance,
into the Nacogdoches Home Depot parking lot.

6.

Rotten from methane,
blinded by the glare of klieg lights,
deafened by cell phones
ringing near body parts,
the detective takes five
from his sifting through
bone fragments and melted Rolex watches
to stargaze at the meteor showers
over Sleeping Beauty Castle.

7.

The night sky has become Pluto's piss lake
of cosmic indifference, raining
the fiery napalm of star jelly
on our man-sized insignificance.
RIP.

Scorched Earth

Half past dark thirty, mom shuffles from room to room. She carries a flashlight, weeping. Urine dribbles down her legs. She navigates through the firebombed Dresden inside her head. The pocked landscape smokes under ruin as her skeletal memory collapses on a fine-bone china girl cradling a charred skull. Dame Wandering Cobblewebs tears up beds, then yanks out drawer after drawer, searching for Dr. Apostle's certificate: *certifiably sane*. In order to save her body, he has destroyed her mind. We should have doused her with gasoline and lit a match when we had the chance.

Life after The Twilight Zone

Life, after *The Twilight Zone* went off the air, lost its mystery. I no longer found purpose picking nits from my lemon meringue hair. I thought I could find the face of Jesus inside a jar of Miracle Whip. Instead, I discovered my dad three days dead in a dirty room at the Generic Motel.

If only I had listened to the silent voice in the fun house mirror. If only I had identified my face on the dismembered Barbie. If only I had studied snake-charming for dummies.

But one dark Halloween night, I met a magician at the Enchanted Tiki Room. *Nothing up my sleeve*, he said. Then, with a wave of his wand, he cheated Death by turning himself into the invisible man. Of course, Death was not amused by the cheap illusionist's trick. So he sulked the rest of the night at the video poker machine. In the meantime, the magician reappeared in a puff of smoke. He recalled the story of the fat woman in line at an all-you-can-eat cafeteria. So busy arguing for her rightful third helping of devil's food cake, she actually forgot to eat.

Something lit up, shorting out the bar's smoke and mirrors. I could no longer delude myself that the rancid dumbwaiter up to my cold water flat was a perfumed stairway to heaven. I came to understand why Brett Weston had used tincture-of-doom to develop his photographs and why he had burned his negatives before he died.

Vita

Jana Salmon Mackin is a poet, journalist, and aspiring alcoholic who has lived for several years in New Orleans. She is an avid Cubs fan. While her body resides in the Big Easy, her heart belongs to the Big Sky where the men are men and so are the women. She was born in California and received her B.A. from the University of California at Santa Barbara and her M.A. from San Francisco State University. Ms. Mackin is a published poet and journalist. Earlier versions of some of the poems here have been published in *Diner*, *Tulane Review*, and *Ellipsis*.