

Janitor: Singing

Once again, death adorns the black minutes  
of Wednesday morning in head trauma  
and toxic rivers of strangled salmon.  
You croon off-key headphone tunes  
and scrub shower drains. Detroit murder rates  
pump Tommy gun crabapples at clean  
garage doors. Meanwhile, the cabal  
of your Franco-Caribbean pop rock  
spangles the staff locker room  
with a heaven of paper dolls. Never mind  
smokestacks that belch cholera. Stadium  
amps that blast carcinogenic dreams.  
Indian summer heart attacks, Bengali  
typhoons, barbecued Nairobi corpses—  
they fade in the bored bossanova  
you bang on toilet paper dispensers.  
It is as your yellow Brute mop bucket  
says. The stick figure soul staggersteps  
back through the crimson triangle  
of the universal *CUIDADO*. To survive,  
ignore the warnings. The days muffle  
old high school acquaintances  
in trenchcoats and flimsy galoshes  
of hall closet suicide. Young daughters  
tumble in highway rollovers,  
perfect skulls crushed like grapefruit.  
The charcoal cat with slipper paws  
that celebrates the final chromatics  
of wounded starvation on New Year's Day  
in a small Idaho town leaks into  
snowbanks the withered bloodstains  
of the world's rose. Its Pandora's voice box  
raises a fanged howl that joins  
the bluesy hook of your exuberant  
chorus over sandy riffs on a beach  
in Martinique. All day the tangerine sun  
jangles the keychain music of a lonely job.  
Pale shadows scour the echo of waves  
in the chlorine light of ten thousand winters.

## Pennsylvania Pantoum

the smeared sun low a firebrand medallion  
gunmetal vapors that blunt silo domes  
deer carcass angles death's brown figurine  
screech and jeer blue jay cries ancient murder

gunmetal vapors that blunt silo domes  
skunk buggy caravan sheer coal train lisp  
screech and jeer blue jay cries ancient murder  
my anger your waiting the vacant between

skunk buggy caravan sheer coal train lisp  
short-circuit yellow marquee that says Andy's  
my anger your waiting the vacant between  
firefly bullets ricochet off windshield

short-circuit yellow marquee that says Andy's  
ghost cattle torque forces hinges of bone  
firefly bullets ricochet off windshield  
stampede of stillness on Kintersburg Bridge

ghost cattle torque forces hinges of bone  
your vacant anger my waiting between  
stampede of stillness on Kintersburg Bridge  
sumac tiers tangle clots of cardinal flight

your vacant anger my waiting between  
the clatter of the dead on the Knox & Kane  
sumac tiers tangle clots of cardinal flight  
daybreak ignites bronze fusillade of blue

the clatter of the dead on the Knox & Kane  
deer carcass angles death's brown figurine  
daybreak ignites bronze fusillade of blue  
the low firebrand sun a smeared medallion

## This Story

There's this story my daughters keep asking me to tell them before bedtime. (The oldest is twelve, her younger sister, ten.) It's about Gene, a kid who played on my baseball team. When I tell it, Gene reappears in my mind, where he'll always remain a rubber-jointed freckle-pocked yokel on the stubbly playing fields behind the Tupperware plant, a gawky immortal slouching like a scarecrow with a few struts yanked out, surrounded by cow pastures, Coleman coolers, and chunky parents packed in rickety aquamarine lawn chairs, the wispy odor of alfalfa and manure and the cheese factory across town. (That year, my dad coached. We were the Jerome Recreation District "Rebels," shirts and caps the color of orange sherbet, bodies as unformed as after-school daylight).

Gene, because of his lanky stretch, was parked at first base. I was the stocky two-bagger, lurking deep in the pocket with a bushel-basket glove no line drive could evade. (Secretly, baseball terrified me. I feared the Bill Buckner dribbler between the ankles, the overthrow to first). Weekly, Gene and I drilled the routine. I netted every rocket grounder from a streak of torched grass. My arm fired comets into Gene's dangling mitt. Over and over, we practiced the snappy out, waiting for game day to launch us into small town fame.

There's this umpire I remember, too. (Here the story diverges). Scott Jackson. Stork-limbed, graceful, and tan with a smoky bush of curls and honey-colored mustache that dripped from his upper lip, like a young Donald Sutherland. (I'm thinking of the early movies, *M. A. S. H.* or *Animal House*, in which he plays an apple-chomping, bedswerving Miltonist). The thing I never told anyone is that sometimes I went to our games just to see Scott Jackson rumble up in his magenta Corvette and lounge shirtless on the hood in stringy cutoffs, his Ovation Balladeer angled across his lap like his last girlfriend as he sailed Cat Stevens over the batting cages into the orange and purple mayhem of sundown.

I idolized Scott Jackson because nobody with authority over me would ever let me live his life—one, as I imagined (and would later discover), that involved temp jobs in sleepy towns, bitter coffee in roadside cafés, romances as unfettered and numerous as tumbleweeds, and a diary crammed with cross-country escapades alongside our principal's son who had a PhD in folk songs from some place in Virginia. It didn't matter that Scott Jackson umped in podunk interstate watering holes so he could scrounge up enough vending machine change to usher him through Thursday. The scarred myth of his presence was enough to keep me coming back to the trampled real estate we called a diamond for another chance at the big play. (Here, my daughters usually start nodding).

I'll always remember Gene because of one day. Scott Jackson, the sun-toasted god, crouched behind home plate. The batter for the A & W Bobcats rapped a worm burner toward second. With a nimble two-step, I scooped it from the dirt and whipped it to Gene. (Now slow motion ensues). Through a film of violet light, the ball arced like a loose moon to first base. (The red stitches spun a frenzy of equators.) At the same time, I saw that Gene was not paying attention to the game. Cap askew, buck teeth capping his concave chin, a reincarnation of Mortimer Snerd—he was standing on first base and turning his body back and forth, limp arms flailing like straps of cowhide nailed to a spinning post, oblivious to the play at first, oblivious to life.

The ball struck him in the chest. His toothpick bones folded. He cried, "Ooph!" My throw shot the silk handkerchief of his skin through a slot to another dimension, leaving only a flash of his blue sneaker soles.

It is when my daughters shake from slumber and laugh that I don't say what I want to say. (Mostly because I want them to savor happiness). What I don't tell them is how I understood instantly that hope for perfection can destroy another. In this story, I want to tell them, the one you're living now, you will prepare for years and when you find people who will stand and receive your best, the love you hurl at them will cut them down at the knees. This story, I want to say, will become the one you tell your children, the one that makes a sport of joy and, as long as we pass it on, ensures the game will never end.