

ANGER KILLS HIMSELF

I wanted to nap one afternoon.
Another row next door, I thought,
though the sound was so regular
when you woke me to listen.
We heard one long scream
followed by one long pause,
then another scream, same pitch,
and another pause, same length.

By the time I got up,
you had already crossed the alley
to find the cry and your neighbor,
cord circling his neck,
hanging on a branch of Dutch Elm,
the most beautiful tree for blocks.
His wife was still keeping the time
of stare, scream and head in hands
when the ambulance came.

That was ages ago.
But last night I heard them again,
only *he* was the one screaming,
and it was constant until all air left him.
Out of the sudden quiet her whisper told me
she should have combed her hair;
then he wouldn't have gotten so mad.

Late in the morning
the lady from the dry-cleaners returned my call,
said my shirt's pattern of crimson flowers
was already faded when I dropped it off.
I hung up and walked the seven blocks
to call her a liar. Enveloped in my yelling,
her thin cheeks had the clear sheen
of a crimped garment bag
when she lost her breath.
Then I myself could hardly breathe.

Our end will come in a picture-perfect, strutting blast of rage.

A postcard you sent from France years ago
still hangs on the fridge.
Most days I hardly notice it:
a burly man carved on a capital

in the choir of Notre-Dame-du-Port.
Crouching demons drape his shoulders,
their scaly arms choke his swelling biceps.
His whole body is smooth.
With thick long legs and a wide muscular torso,
only his soul would be light enough
to hurl into hell. His deep mouth gulps air.
His eyes are stretched. Above them,
two full waves of hair move in a stone flow
past his blown cheeks. His long sword,
its hilt gripped with both hands,
rises straight from the waist,
edges between hard breasts,
then points to his throat—
all power about to be spent.

To me he looks about as Romanesque
as a dimpled lifeguard:
athletic, handsome, mythical;
a kind of Saint George who could
slay Satan's minions, or die trying.
Such chiseled vice might pass for virtue.
Perhaps the medieval sculptor gave
this Anger too flattering a personification.
I imagine someone must have noticed
the Sin's lovely allure in proud relief—
a cleric once robbed of church plate
or a respected widow raped in youth;
someone who had suffered a knight's rage
or a husband's fist, who would have known
that such crafted beauty, so hard to resist,
demanded a deadly caption to warn us of stabbing fury,
how ruin follows the one unleashing it.
So at the top there is this: *Ira se occidit*.

A CROSS AND THREE RINGS: ANNACHIE'S FAREWELL TO JEANNIE ON HER BIRTHDAY

For you a cross of diamonds and topaz,
the blue stone set in the silver middle,
where the slack chin of a derelict Jew
would have sunk, tilted slightly to your left.

Two years before hail stripped this May of leaves,
you found a ring of the same stuff. It was
swaddled in a note to you and your dog,
then placed in an empty six-pack carton
wedged between your front door and cat-clawed screen,
at your robed shins when you woke, nearly noon,
to fetch Saturday's paper and inhale
air free of bedroom dowl and staircase dust,
stirred by pets and a mother and daughter
who never minded squalor's density.

The first ring I whimsically bought you
you left in some pocket of spotted clothes
mounded for Goodwill. Must have been dirt cheap,
your casual misplacement seemed to say,
as if the object's vanishing mocked me.

Still, the first loss was easier endured
than the next. If words and a gift could raise
what's dead, I'd pledge, *with this cross I thee wed*.

Third ring on, you seep into a new life,
the prize of a venture capitalist,
who took you by the arm just a few days
after you spoke of faithfulness and me,
the breaker of your loneliness, bearer
of laughs and my sister's eco-coffin,
sunk by my estimate between the time
of loosened buttons and freshly combed hair.

Hardly bigger than a rose bush's thorn,
this given, un-placard and bodiless
crux is best accepted if kept hidden.
Otherwise, it will cry out for account,
dangling round your neck just before a kiss.
Even now, friend, I state the obvious:
your trinket flattered is your secret pried.

Bury it for us in that lush corner

of your backyard, next to that tree, that birch
peeling by the pyramid of looped hops.
In spring that spot puddles first. Joan, next door,
aiming her stick of walrus *oosik* there,
swears March's melt revives deceased dwellers.
That ground—once well, once hearth, once grotto—calls.

June nights, after long suppers, we'd lie there.
Stars shimmered brighter then, for then I thought
you could woo the biggest to us with song.
Whole notes of a glittering scale, you mused,
pointing as you went *do-re-me-fa-sol*....
Crowded azure lights on heaven's grand staff
you counted as ties, slurs, triplets or trills.
Low Venus, fading, was always F#.

Once the hole is dug, lay the piece face up
as if an affixed ghost could watch what you,
ecstatic, once plucked in a waking dream:
ripe violet stars, orbs so near they could
illuminate the earthen veil of a mired gem.

Fall is when you move. I'm already gone.
Funny diagnosis, the doctor gives:
"narcissistic loss." I for worse was left
in you. Writing prescriptions, he recalls
The Wizard of Oz, the Scare Crow's stuffing,
vital straw flying monkeys take apart.

Yet pills, even mixed with metaphor, fail:
though the condition of a self that slipped
out of its life and into someone else
doesn't compare to three hours on a cross,
tranquilizers, I have learned, die faster
than an afternoon of Friday passion.

As for what happens next you need not say.
I'll sense when that choice earth is over it.
One night arid winds in autumn will come
from the east, and sputtering shortnesses
of breath will make my dirt-clod eyes bug out.

But once breathing's toil eases and I blink,
we'll be our past: stone-still and eulogized,
like companion martyrs entombed beside
a font where Lethied pilgrims like to drink.

FIGURA

The coldness lurks in morning's proudest light.
I know the littlest aches foretell my end.
But still I feel for spring in hardened snow.

DAYDREAMS OF CALIFORNIA AND A PHONE CALL

1

When February's snow thickens and clumps,
the Berkeley Marina
is where tugging nostalgia takes me
to see kites,

some the size of giant centipedes,
others the shape of pre-historic birds;
their faces are totems and their flyers
take the name, sometimes even appearance,
of each floating animal, the flag of a clan.

In fact
the little round clouds here
remind me of Durkheim's baldness,
the way it balloons over the blue border
on the cover of *Elementary Forms*.

I imagine him, with his glasses
pointed gently downward,
as a French rabbi
on an armchair that hangs in the sky.
A cloud among clouds
he observes and at last shares in
the rest of a nebulous Sabbath.

To the lighthearted sociologist
kites might resemble
impaired *churingas*
in slow and fluttered motion.

And in those parts of the air
where faces of reptiles
hover neck and neck
the wind makes quiet sounds
of slurred and whistled breaths.

The kited Marina,
imagined from the distance of a far-away winter,
is the measure of my dreams.

2

And my brother is always there
at the hollowed-out bottom

of a hill, his deck shoes
planted before the tide's sandy arc.

His line stretches the highest.
It is attached to the sun.
The light he tethers
gives each saurian form
its airy iridescence.

Strands of his thick fire-and-ash hair
rise and fall with the gusts.

He needs me to take hold of the orange reel,
to free his fingers from the strain of the twine.
And I want to. And I do.

He feels for changes
in the breeze
as he walks and smokes.

I tug at the gentle glare.

Glancing back I see
his body blending into the bay,
his shirt filling with a squall,
his steps going
closer to the docks,
away from the knoll.

Gaunt and miniature
in the distance he waves to me.
His cupped and damaged hand,
afloat in the cigarette's fog,
points to a striped spinnaker
about to fly off the bow of a puffed yawl.

When we get home
we'll ask Mom
for cookies and cognac.

3

Beneath the kitchen lamp, eyes closed again,
I see that beautiful black roundness of a seal's head.
It glistens and bobs, as the weaving streams
of the kites' blissful tails twist beside the water.
My eyes open. Back in white Edmonton

I am still handling garlic, mayonnaise and oil
mixed in a mustard jar, with the lie of a shaky simile
riveting me to the wintery place I'm desperate to leave:
no matter what, scattered walnuts *won't ever*
settle on top of lettuce like boats anchored in seaweed.

Conflated memories make better dreams.
My garlic, the milky package reads, comes from Gilroy,
that spot I visited once as a boy craving to smell what was raw.
Again to the shore of home I drift. The webbed feet
of a white albatross grip the top of a bulb-shaped buoy.
My eyes stay shut until the buzz of a phone.

4

Mother is calling to say I have jury duty
in Martinez: yet another oil town,
wet and windy and oceanless.
On the edge of a strait that looks
as hard as a shellacked box,
this county seat of Contra Costa
toils under the hot glint of refinery tanks.

The moiling waterway of Martinez
is as much a coffin to me
as the grim river that halves the city of Edmonton,
where the air dries out once the flow freezes.

5

The Californian official who sent home the letter
of my summons refuses to accept
her argument that my living in Canada
exempts me from judging those of my native land.
I tried to explain to the man....

This praying mother's protests rarely matter
by the time the special intentions of her lost ones
have inched their way along her rosary's shivering beads.
Sorrowful mysteries, they can no longer plead for themselves.
Sleepless unto death, they are sentenced to the hard time
of eyes and testimony they can hardly close.

"To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve."

Changing the subject, she asked me
if I remembered (hell-bent-on-discipline)
Sister Monserat, my fifth-grade teacher.
She left her order years ago, distraught,
I was told, and then moved to a neighborhood

where hanging flower pots line the streets,
somewhere—Mom forgot exactly—on the Marin side of the bridge.
Apparently, she had a pretty place.
From her view she could see sailboats
in their berths and windsurfers near the cove

where Donny went to sleep
on water. Like a kite let go of,
he floated away on the same fogless morning
her usual fast-paced walk across the Gate
was cut short.

For all we know the former nun
closed her eyes before the parting splash,
rose numb to the surface of a green swell,
blew out from her belly his pieces of swallowed ash
then rolled her wailing body back into the sea.

THE HAT THAT LAST I WORE

The hat that last I wore also wore me.
Its crown and brim, bands of mercy and hope,
stanch'd the blue pulse of sorrow in my veins,
warmed me, bald, as thickest hair never did.
The hat that last I pressed to shed the rain
scented my hearth with fresh wool as it dried.
The hat that last I tipped near candlelight
gave crooked teeth the tint of copper ale.
The hat that last I loved will outlast me.
Near death I'll miss the hat that last I wore.
Would, then, that this hat of mine dear as skin
could out of some deep coffin coax me. O
that hat and head might somehow last for good!