

Three poems from *Self-Portrait with Expletives*

FLASHBACK AT CASTELFRANCO

Dawn in Micanopy, Florida, and the old Impala
Floats the canopy roads, the last hours of acid
Stripping the protective film from the world
So every tree and fence blazes
With end-of-bandwidth jitters, my breath
A shallow tinnitus audible in the orbit
Of my limbs... I cut the radio and slow
To an idle beneath the live oaks, Spanish moss
Dripping to the roadside floor, my only god
The present moment. Then I turn off
The car lights to drift in new moon silence.
For a few seconds, a great maw encloses.
In beauty and terror, I flash the lights back on
To stay true to the road beneath the canopy,
And a white fence glows in a burst
Until I kill the beams again,
One fascination
And another,
The world's first question strobing on and off.

Thirty years later, on this moonless scotch broom hill
Above three sleeping late-Renaissance steeples,
All the little windows flicker on below
Like fireflies in the olive trees.
As the dark mountain hulks beneath the last bright shine
Of sky across the valley, the molecules
Of another air
Seem to flood this one. My ten-year-old
Stands with her binoculars and stares
Into the same alluring Tuscan spill, a silent vista
So redolent one can see how prayer erupts.
Aglow, entranced by sunset, she asks how far

To the mountains, there on the other side.
And as I answer in the explanatory lingua she loves,
A host of paternal lies rise, then resign
in my chest. For I know what she'll come to know
Some long, road-coarse night:
We live in two places at once.
There is darkness and there is the lit-up world,
And behind both
An immeasurable quiet.

[*Kestrel*]

THIS, THEN

Every once in a while, it's true: I get sick of dying.

Iambic ghosts choiring

their lovely, churchless songs,

All the lines of the poem leaning toward terminus

Like rows of low windbent weeds—

The long vacation laughs

Last summer, Ralph's reed-dry three-beat wise remarks

Fading fast

As I gaze from the first draft,

a recognition of the dusk,

The last blaze rose holding to my wife's trellis,

her stone Buddha

Offering its constancy to us,

A hint of musk

Above the blackening daylilies—

And so I remind myself of this, then:

Not twenty hyaline seconds

After three rattling slams

Shook Aeromexico 448, northbound for LAX,

After the hard starboard lean,

After the thousand foot drop,

and the next,

After the screams of the mothers finger-vised to their children,

I knew I'd found the earthbound pivot of the poem. Three days back

As I'd begun writing in San Miguel, where I watched

From the high study window,

a single tone

Signaled beyond human ears the instant

The flock of white herons would lift
On a late-morning thermal
as if carrying

The old ascending subject

Over the grey and sandstone homes,
The little white Moorish domes mimicking
the sacristies

Of the town's Catholic churches. Between that hilltop window
And the serrated spires of *La Parochia*, the cathedral,
The tall, parched cypress trees
aimed their mortal needs

At an arboreal heaven. As if a message from God
Were tacked on a pennant in the sky, over and over

Every living thing arched upward—

As the pilots say, bad chop is the gut-check.
And yet a week ago the flight south
Over the iron-stained desert mountains—
Crossed by that carless road
deadheading
Under splotches of cloud shade—
had known only

The airy sentimentality of silk.

When I woke two hours out of LAX
And peered down
At the pearl-white burlled base of cloud
And the gnarling tower rising from it,
I was home again,
As one is home every few months
Or years

In a recurring dream, the few skittering pre-flight nerves
Quieted, and I remembered
This old version of my escape from death—

How I'd tumble into the lush tropical hold
Of the cloud itself, a bed
In which I'd roll weightless, high over the expanse,
held

In the alert omniscient trance of the poem
Inscribing itself across still blue.

We all know, such longing extracts a price.
As it happened,

In that house above San Miguel I began this poem
At a desk beneath the famous Magritte print,
All the black-tied businessmen, validated
In long dark coats and bowlers,
—inert, floorless, aloft—

Each briefcase as surreal ballast,
The artist faking infinitude.

Thirty years ago in my journal
I wrote notes for a poem about my sweat-soaked dream of flying,
How I'd soared

in slow-motion acrobatics
Above the tables, above Ralph and the other drinkers,
Above the bartender and the waitresses
Crowded into some sawdust tavern,
happy as gulls

With their lusty crowing, utterly unaware
Of my magic. And, despite my brief weightless joy,

I suddenly knew some clenched maw had spawned the dream—
And, still dreaming,
alone on the unblanketed sheets,
Ruffled, dank, the twisted splotch of my body

Clawed up the walls of bright falling air—

This memory, too, came to me in the seconds
our lives returned.

Like Magritte's floating men,

I prefer to hover,

If only with the smile of the momentarily saved—

How did the fear of falling atomize

into the air of these lines,

As if I'd been tethered to morphine,

Each drip a dream of flight?

A hundred miles

Past the cloud, my wife's grip dammed blood up my arm.

This evening in the garden, when I told her

How the poem's new turn came to me instantly,

how I'd burned

Key lines into memory only moments after the air softened,

She said it was a way

Of riding out the panic in silence, the way

I always deal with dying.

I know: All flights—save one—land safely.

Still, for days

After the wind-shear of that storm-dark hammerhead,

I thought I'd worked out a poem

In which a life

Could tear itself from the sky—and then,

as if air were art,

Refuse to fall.

[*Ploughshares*]

EIGHT HOURS IN THE NIXON ERA

The parabola of the suitcase as it flew
from the Watergate balcony mimicked
my inner life the year the low voice
on the phone said, FBI, do you know
a Bob Grant? My mother, a Republican

County Supervisor, was at church.

It was a complex era. Did we laugh
too easily? Was I to tell the agent
that Bob was a friend who'd palmed
a credit card for a wild D.C. ride

as Sam Irvin and the good guys were
moving in for the kill? Bob, whose jet south
would pass D.C.-bound Air Force One
that midnight, November 18th, 1973,
just after Nixon claimed he was no crook.

Bob had invited me for the gig, but
I knew better—and I didn't know better
often. Bob seduced Ralph and Jessie,
both staying the month in Jersey with me
and my publicity-conscious mother,

the same Ralph and Jessie who were on
the verge of dissolution, ever since
I'd been falling for Jessie and she for me,
though of course Ralph was my best friend,
and Jessie and I hated ourselves, hippie

clichés sloughing into a closet or basement.

Even now I try to laugh it off. I told
Agent Kaplaw I'd never heard of Bob
Grant. Boozy Bob, with whom I'd smoked
weed for six years in college while his muddy

Utah speakers alternately shook from
Zeppelin sex riffs and Streisand show tunes,
who we later discovered longed himself
to sleep with Ralph, *that* Bob had only
minutes earlier answered the suite phone,

hung up, looked at Ralph and Jessie with
the gravity of a guy on bad acid, all
of them wordlessly putting into effect
Escape Plan A, Ralph heading to the car
while Jessie and Bob packed the one suitcase

with the contraband of a good D.C. shopping
blitz, compliments of a Mr. Robert Kitchen,
address at this point unknown, owner
of a missing gold MasterCard. I hung up.
My mother pulled in the drive. The phone

didn't ring. It continued not to ring.

As Ralph pulled to the curb and Bob and
Jessie descended down the elevator,
exited, then stuffed the goods back
in the split suitcase and jumped into

the Cutlass, also rented courtesy of
Mr. Kitchen, and headed for Dulles,
my mother and I chatted about Mass
and Father Mulroney's somnambulant
sermon, though she didn't care to knock

the priest because she still harbored
hope that my rejection of the family faith
was a temporary moral seizure and didn't
want to sour the wine while I lapsed.
She went upstairs for her afternoon nap.

The phone rang. Agent Kaplaw assured me
he would slap a warrant on my ass
for aiding and abetting and haul me down
to D.C. if I didn't talk. I gave up Bob,
then hung up. Do we laugh too easily?

My mother's hero the President
was a traitor—nothing else
she could call it. He'd lost her faith.

And how could she win
her election next year? Car doors slammed

in front of the house. I met Ralph and Jessie
outside. One look at me and they knew
trouble had trailed them. We called Bob
at home in Gainesville. He would
turn himself in, as he'd promised. We

told my mother that rich Bob wasn't
so rich as he'd made out, that he'd urged
Ralph and Jessie to DC for a weekend
on him, that the weekend was stolen,
that the FBI had traced the billed calls

to *her* house. So practiced, we lied
to soften the story, but
she had a Republican fit anyway.

Soon enough Ralph left for California,
Jessie and I took a house, taught GED

in Jersey, Bob called the president
of Mastercard and worked off
the three grand. No jail time. It's still
a complex era, how the comic
can shroud regret. Jessie and I hit the road

for California, then broke up six years later

when she became a Rolfer,
a Gestalt therapist, went in for enema
and past lives therapies—
separately, I think. Bob is gay in Florida,

Ralph slept with another friend's lover,
and now he's married to her.
I'm married, too, happy and faithful
for two decades. In the adrenaline rush
of time, Ralph and I have remained

best of friends. We try to navigate
all the old stories. When
our families vacation together, suitcases
bloat, rarely fly.
I sometimes think of Nixon, how he failed us all.

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