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*B* *Detail from* The Garden of Earthly Delights

The smell stays longer  
than the mist does,  
though the mist is prettier: backlit  
and blessing the locusts  
with its bride's veil,  
already the taste of pesticide  
sweet on my tongue.

I note its brief passage  
across the yard, the phosphorescence  
coining the grass  
with its half-lives  
and quarter-lives, its potency the yard's  
payment for a stout tree.

Children scream and run  
to the neighbor's yard  
awhile, their sharp cries  
like blades of  
leisurely daylight cutting in  
and pegging down the backyard  
shortcuts, the calm

and thickening thunderhead  
of shrubs.  
I lean back and turn  
as the leaf buds turn,  
pivot, and unfurl,  
as the robins knit their crude nests

in cedar and weeping cherry,  
and listen

to wind instruments turned  
percussive:  
last night's rain pummeling

and pinging  
the aluminum eaves;  
all of us—the shingles, the eaves,  
the trumpet vines  
in piggyback  
up the daylight brick—expanding in the new heat.



Though the locusts work hardest  
and are the last to blossom,  
they nevertheless provide  
a pitiful display,  
twin windmills gumming the zephyrs.

The cherries, upyard, are like wild ponies,  
all bristling mane  
and a muscular crop,  
though too high up  
for us to harvest.

Only the jays feed well  
and an occasional starling.  
A wild mulberry towers  
its first green  
shoots from a lower notch. I chop them out

with a dull hatchet—  
the shoots grow back,  
their transfer of light occurring  
at the speed of light,  
though whatever noise they make

is subsonic  
and part of a larger rhythm: the maple  
cutting its sundial wedges  
into the lawn; honey bees and hornets  
in loose clouds, thirty feet

high in the locusts; my daughter  
down below them swinging her arms,  
spotted, like a deer  
in shadow,  
now draped in blazing chevrons.



Some days I trace with a dirty finger  
the path water takes to light—  
from wherever the fire is to wherever  
the wires take it:  
the water snapped  
like a luminous rope

through the hard turns  
and straightaways of the piping,  
sometimes braiding  
as elegantly as milk braids,

sometimes hammering  
the welded joints;

either way, accumulating pressure and speed  
as the pipe diameters narrow  
and it leaps to steam—  
twice through the fire maybe,  
depending on the design—and then  
a straight shot to the turbine

so that at the far end the juice can spurt  
in a long, continuous spasm:  
to the grids at the outskirts  
of cities,  
and then on to the cities,  
stuffing each house with radiance  
and insight:

Horace breezily flopped open  
to his beloved spring;  
Catullus to the infinity  
of kisses that would slay him,  
his “bean-pod boat” hauled out of the water  
like useless ballast.

From shadow, from deepening  
garden, the hose pouring  
out its significant rope, my wife  
finally calls to me  
to shut them off  
and to come  
outside, there’s still light in the yard.



Two midmornings in June:  
my grandfather finally gone  
mad, the atavism spiking our zone  
in the family with its haywire comet:  
he's fully dressed and asleep each day

when I come to visit,  
coiled like a snail  
on an upturned leaf, momentarily  
stunned by a shaft of sunlight  
and the tipped blue lens of the sky.

Later, in the activity room, he rubs  
and rubs his hands,  
as if he could press away  
the weakness that has struck down  
each ligament and vein

in his plumber's axis—  
hand to eye, eye  
to mind—  
until the whole grooved network  
is like knotted rope, wetted down, then suddenly frozen.



Late summer, the juniper bone-dry,  
incendiary,  
in stacked pieces

beside the barn, everywhere  
the whistle going out of the grass,

the moist, succulent mercy . . .

He raises his fist, and she  
takes it; he spits on his son's back,  
and his son takes it:

the old man's witness to anger

and a withering brain. At least,  
that's what the doctors tell us,  
and they stem it more  
with drugs, long drives; but he rants on  
and begs death to sting him,

to shake him as a small dog does  
a knotted rag, until somebody jokes

*let's return the damn gun*  
*and give him back the bullets,*

and we very nearly do it.

But then the mystery takes over,  
the medical guesswork:  
they zap him five times  
with a calibrated voltage,  
and the clean, nuclear light

fills his head, all the way  
from Palo, fusing it maybe,  
or reinvigorating a dormant lobe  
so the underlying rhythm  
of his words is *work* again, and *walk* and *wish*.



We are simply here in the closing-  
down threshold. In the contrariness  
and radial shifts  
of planet to star. I have to alternate

between the patio and shade  
to perfect a coolness, each time eyeing,  
but from a different  
perspective, the dry, though still flowering

garden. My wife, downframe,  
visibly tanner now that a strap  
has fallen,  
idly brushes some part of it

into her cheek and brow  
so that it stains her as the sunlight  
does, seems to hold her  
as she leans down

into our daughter's pool—staggered now  
with cloud shifts,  
reflective heat—  
cups some of its water along her glistening forearms.



Sappho says *a thin flame*,  
Catullus that his loins melt: nightly  
we sink to the plush  
sheets, and the days burn off like alcohol.

## Hellfighters

It was never the size of his penis that made them blanch, there in the  
men's room  
at the Paramount,  
but it always started there—  
the casual downward glancing first,  
and then the slow panning upward as in the horror shows,  
as if to heighten  
their recoil and physical revulsion.  
You could see it how they zippered quickly,  
barely glanced at themselves in the row of distorting mirrors  
as they raced over the  
gum-dented carpeting  
to that first blast of summer daylight.  
I know now that what they wanted was simply  
profile,  
some recognizable set of the jaw to soothe them,  
as the movie had with Wayne's  
heroics,  
all grim-faced and completely business,  
the camaraderie of men pissing with other men  
into porcelain drains,  
but what they saw was this:  
the beautifully sad and girlish face  
of my mongoloid uncle,  
his eyes glistening with such pure joy  
through the haze of drugs  
that it must have embarrassed them first,  
then stunned them to the very roots they  
held.  
The complicity of it!

As if those cracked stick genes could be theirs,  
the constant stress to the crown of the skull not to unwind.  
It's no wonder they fought  
their way to daylight,  
accepted with open arms the blast furnace shock of the sun;  
it's no wonder women  
pushed their children  
deeper onto their straws  
as we ambled slowly past the incoming crowd,  
always the last ones out—  
he had to understand some aspect of the cranes and fires and  
blasts—  
besides, he craved my nickels, our bus fare home,  
would drop each one gleefully  
into the ticking metallic box  
as if he were my guide  
or father,  
and this, instruction,  
a casual summer outing,  
as we held tight to the chrome rail  
against the chop of traffic,  
our palms lashed to the heat and residue  
of the just-now pulled-away hands.

*Trash Fires Burning Up and Down the Alley*

There on delicate folds of Kleenex lie our mother's  
kisses, her soft  
lips muted, repeated,

a hundred times it seems, and left  
to sleep  
there as weightless doves

until our father's Zippo snaps and they  
are briefly  
kited for an instant, fully liquid,

and then everywhere is fire, tongues  
and sheets of  
fire. I'd be punched out from flailing

at air, and sore in the ribs, so I'd just sway  
in the bleeding  
twilight, hauled down,

roped and knotted, swinging  
by my heels  
from the oak like bait or a new lamb.

In another yard, children laughing and screaming  
beneath the shuttlecock.  
One or two others (perhaps you

among them) painting soft jungle  
landscapes  
onto gray-green clapboard,

the shapes evaporating, shrinking  
to ferns  
and jellyfish and primitive masks,

the child molester (whose world this was)  
angling  
effortlessly among us, freshening

our parents' drinks, or coaxing one  
of the fathers  
to play accordion. Some days

I can't help thinking about that summer  
coolness  
everywhere, daylight hammering

in its full August fury the grain of the roofs,  
the child placed  
*just so* beside a tool,

or the body standing, muscles rigid,  
so as not to graze  
with bare flesh—

small of the back or buttocks, wings  
of the shoulder  
blades—the cold edge of

aluminum. What can it mean  
to be set  
fully naked at the beginning of your life

inside a garbage can, somebody's  
    father pounding  
    with twice-straightened nails a carport,

somebody's mother (ours?) singing  
    Sarah Vaughan  
    to the sunset. Somewhere

in the great expanse of evening,  
    the lone  
    child wandering. . . . So many thresholds:

the bird in the sky, a bluejay, the color  
    of chalk;  
    rain like stilettos of mercury:

you're four again or thirty.  
    You lean  
    toward the hose (both of you own

homes now; one of you has  
    children)—  
    the water shooting too hot at first

because it's been baked in the  
    coil,  
    but then flooding to a drinkable coolness.