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STATE OF THE ART

On a jackhammer morning
that could be September, a crow banks
around the house next door, followed
by three pigeons a minute later. Do you
still think there are no random events in the universe,
Herr Heisenburg? Other birds—sparrows—
hop across my roof and peer over the edge.
Oh, the pure outrage of crows in the distance,
followed by restrained, Poe-like dignity

as a funnel of silence crosses the yard
disguised as a peregrine. A sparrow crouches
to become a knot on a dead branch; even
the wind stalls, silencing the chimes.
Two seconds, three at best, and a squirrel
clatters up the drain pipe; a siren with breath boxes

scrambles down Hamline Avenue.
Anything else in this synchronicity boat,
Dr. Jung? Roofers clawing
through old shingles? The phlox with blown beards
drooping like Spanish moss? Something
besides these crows
whose ink I dip my pen into,
shouting themselves hoarse?

BRONISLAW AND THE DEVIL

What can he know, never straying
from the dirt floors of the farm,
each year a commissar gathering
the tsar's portion of wheat, pigs,
and sons who'd come of age?

Or that the first day in New York,
his elation would shrink to nothing
when he froze in the middle of a street,
teamsters shouting, *Get out of the road,*
you goddam Polack, gawking

at the first black man he'd ever seen?
Among delivery vans, ice wagons,
and vegetable vendors, how could he guess
Lucifer's too dazzling for naked eyes,
or that forty-five years from then

he'd be selling houses in South Bend
to black families moving in
as Polish families moved out?
Right now he's not thinking *Angel*
or *Black Madonna of Czestochowa*;

he's thinking the cold knuckle of hell,
he's fingering the worthless *zlotys* in his pocket
and the crumpled address
of someone from his village.
Citizens of the old world

look for relatives in the new;
a man he thinks is the devil
rounds a corner between the Battery
and Wall Street.
How can I not love him

standing there, surrounded
by chaos in the street,
as he tries to think if he can hide
or run back to the boat, or take one
step forward and start bargaining?

AFTERWARDS

They told how my mother walked the floor
from midnight to dawn the day I was born,
my father pacing between flights on his D.C. run.

Afterwards, hazy from anesthesia,
she asked for me. They gave her a stuffed rabbit to hold,
a shot of phenobarbital for amnesia,

and bundled me to her the next day,
my nose no longer smushed like a flounder
from the birth canal. She took it on faith

I had not been replaced as I studied the world
—her face and hands, the bottle
they slipped between my gums—

with the seriousness of a Presbyterian minister.
Looking through the nursery window,
visiting hours over—a father's duty,
in those days, satisfied nine months before—

he said I looked like every other baby
in the ward: *crying for attention,*

*forlorn and wizened, and red-faced
as any old wino.*

THE OTHER

You were the one who sweet-talked
good grades out of Sister Josephine,
while I sat in the back staring at snowflakes
big as galleons and shipwrecks.

In March, we were wings on the same biplane,
a snap roll just off the runway. In April,
we carried the torches and torpedoes of lilacs.

Remember being a cat rubbing darkness
under wildflowers all those lifetimes ago,
watching wind ruffle a jay's feathers?

First you were the snake
biting a woman's ankle by a creek,
then you became the woman herself
who almost made it back to the world,

but near the tunnel mouth, trying to gulp
the first strands of sweet air, you cried out
from the light, or the stab of air
that stuck in your throat
the instant you left the world. Now

when I look back down the stairs
I see at best a shadow curled in other shadows.
Usually it is a bat, that ultrasonic trick of night.
Other times it is nothing: some twig
falling through the streetlight's glare like ice.

IRIS

The iris, those fleshpots,
are at it again—it must
be May—exploding
among the emerald bodies
of dragonflies, bobbing
in the slightest breeze,
thinking nothing—as in
Hold the night for me,
I feel faint; as in Heartbreak,
you got any other tunes
in there?

Nine-tenths water,
one-tenth purple soufflé,
and what starts life
as boxing gloves
ends with the smell
of bridesmaids.
Will they ever wear
these things again?
Will they be here tomorrow

after the hailstorm
and neighborhood children
pausing in hide and seek—
with no size limits
or catch and release?

With their furry black tongues
beside the circular staircases
of lilies, what will they whisper
when that wild purple
goes invisible at midnight?

GREAT CIRCLE ROUTES

This window, clear waterfall,
keeps nothing of light that rests
on the tongues of plants, no photographs
of stars, nothing of a jet's dryness
clinging to great circle routes—

but in 1929, at this very window
you could hear Speed Holman's engine snarl
as he flattened the propeller's pitch
and throttled back on base leg
to his home field by the fairgrounds.

The ghost in knickers and argyle socks
caught lying on our bed one night
could have heard the biplane, even seen it
looping the loop through the high bridge.
Damn, I can hear him saying, hot damn!

On May 17, 1931, during his signature stunt,
an outside loop, Holman's safety belt broke.
How many times had he done this? Upside down,
a hundred feet off the runway, held snug
by the same belt, the same white corrosion
eating the anchor bracket?

Time is like this. In my father's double exposures,
my uncles and aunt, stern and Polish,
stand next to the brick house on Brookfield;
superimposed on them, my mother—

months before I become a tiny secret
inside her—leans against a Globe Swift
at the Cleveland Air Races, smiling.

It is these spring mornings
where cows wander down
to shadowy freedoms of pasture;
it's the sound of bees mired
in quadratic equations of lilacs,
sucking light from the blossoms.

MAYFLIES

Two years underwater,
and now two days to finish
their mission on earth
before a swallow ends it for them
or a trout, before the sun
dries them out, before
their two days dry up.

Not of the order *True Flies*,
they squirm out of their old bodies,
the fragile seaweed of gills,
emerging into adulthood
with lungs and wings,
learning in ten seconds everything
they will ever know of flight.

And to avoid temptation
from the real job
—sex, sex, sex—
there's no mouth,
not even a straw
to sip the water they flutter on.

What was God thinking!
Can one appetite negate the other,
making desire so weak in one so small?

Two days, at most, of frenzy,
then spinning down
to lay their eggs, soundless as wind,

their new lungs unsuited
to the water that gave them birth,
their cellophane wings splayed
and useless as broken paddles.

MY BROTHER FLIES SOLO

The sky's hard and splintery:
gray patches of snow, gray trees
scratching upward, the whole world
lacking color back then.

In the black and white snapshot,
a J-5 Cub is just lifting off
the frozen sod
of Chain O'Lakes Field.

At five hundred feet, it banks downwind
for another landing. Again and again.
My father steps into the flight shack
to warm himself with stale coffee,

his pride growing more routine
with each takeoff and landing.

*In twenty years, drunk and desperate,
his own son dying, my brother will call
from California, wanting to steal a B-17
to bomb the shit out of the Ayatollah.*

*It will feel as though the war had never ended,
and the gods still bargain
over what they'll give up
for the destruction of Troy:*

*the waiting, the doctors' predictions, the chemo.
Promising to take up flying again,
everything, he tells his son, will be fine.*

As he brings the J-5 over the fence
at forty-five or fifty, as he touches down
and adds power to go around again,
he can see how brown the world is,

how blue with white patches of snow and ice.
But how small the plane looks from here.
If it weren't for the bad exposure,
this could be a Japanese painting: a few trees

lining the road north of the field,
the tiny airplane with my brother's face
behind shiny plexiglass,
and all this sky.

EXCELSIOR AMUSEMENT PARK, 1932

Captain Jack Payne, thick as a bulldog,
isn't smiling atop the hundred-foot ladder—
it's the Depression, after all. He licks
a finger to the wind and waits, ready
to lean forward, a jackknife
slicing through blazing water.

A loaf of bread only costs a nickel,
but the show's free, bless you, sirs.
Of course, the tank's deeper
than five feet—Captain Jack's no fool—
and he only climbs eighty rungs.
What the rubes don't know won't hurt.

The crowd presses against the ropes
to watch him fall according to the formula
Galileo calculated when everything
—souls and thought—was supposed to rise.
Captain Jack stands, shoulders squared,
on a swaying plank in the sky,

in the infinity of wind, solid American
syllables blaring from the loudspeaker:
Whenever you're ready, Captain!
Pressing against the ladder, he waits
for the final metallic words to reach him:
And good luck on your downward journey.

PONTE GARIBALDI

That first year in Rome when the language
was stoned under my tongue,
I stopped a businessman
by the post office to bum a cigarette

and ask where was *Putta Garibaldi*.
He looked at me with astonished eyes.
Yes, he had heard correctly:
a scruffy, twenty-year-old American, smoking

a pungent *Filtro*, calling Italy's great unifier
a whore. *Putta Garibaldi*, I said again,
do you know where? He had no words,
and raised his nose,

setting sail toward less turgid air.
I could wander hours
until I found a familiar landmark—
Via del Corso or the Pantheon—

or finish the cigarette and catch a bus,
for the morning air was full of cabbages
and carnations thrown in the street
after a grand party. Whose?

I asked no one else,
but they all knew; that much was clear.