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OLDENBURG'S DUAL HAMBURGERS

1.

They squat on the floor and ooze,
Sagging under the mayonnaise and the relish,
The tomatoes, the lettuce, and the sad ketchup:
The mournful burgers, bursting their double buns.
Fools! They look like gorilla space pilots.
If I received such hamburgers over the counter,
I would fling them in the chef's face.
If I were they, I would be baleful too.

2.

Vroom!

Dual hamburgers are ready to blast off for
Intergalactic Space.

Rest Areas along the Milky Way! Garbage Pails!
The West is won! The burgers are in orbit!

! !

Dual hamburgers look as though they could
die of boredom.

3.

The first burger caught fire and plummeted
to earth over Passaic.

It was the end of a dream.

Already the posters had appeared:



Go Shuttleburger between
Geneseo and Altoona.



A farmer went mad when he saw it in the
troposphere.

And then before the eyes of a horrified nation
The first passengers were charcoal-broiled
between the non-flammable buns.

A Bermuda onion sailed out of heaven like a
discus.

The merchants of Passaic, the warehouses and
public statues,

Sank in the sizzling mustard.

4.

Is it friends they want?

Is it children, who would know how to play
with them?

I would like to take them with me.

I would like to go off into the world with dual
hamburgers and have adventures.

I would teach them languages and ancient history.

I would teach them to run and sing and take
them to the Sheep Meadow and turn them
loose.

I would have them learn the tricks of the trade,
paint the town red, go into business for
themselves, grow old gracefully, eat an
apple a day, take the bull by the horns, know

their ass from their elbow, take a chip off
the old block, do it up brown, rise to the top
of the heap, live free or die, do or die, never
say die, love it or leave it, never give a
sucker an even break, and marry a nice girl.
I would teach them to love me.

5.

Are dual hamburgers conscious beings?
Some have noted in them a strange arrogance.
And some have found that in certain lights their
glumness assumes the character of tragic
knowledge.
Others have been enraged by the way they sit
there smugly
As if they were the turds of God.
Among the museum-goers several parties have
crystallized.
Some would have them burned at the stake.
Others would make them wear pants.
Some would build a forbidden ark around them;
others, a laboratory.
Still others would stick a pin in them and show
up the whole hoax.
As for me, I have spent hours studying them,
Seeking some spark of mind, some moral quality.
My feeling is stronger than ever that man was
not meant to solve
The secret of the burgers.

6.

I imagine a city of good burgers.
The buses and subways choked with burgers.
Studious burgers in the public library.

Frivolous burgers in the singles bars.
Angry burgers marching to City Hall.
60,000 burgers at a ballgame.
Stout burgers, lean burgers, burgers in bowlers
and Bermuda shorts.
Brouhaha! Billions of burgers, basted with
butter and blood, bustling in their buns.

7.

Atlas-like under their glop,
Dual hamburgers sigh and tolerate my chin-
stroking.
So many have rushed by this corner, man,
woman, and child,
A woozy dance, a blur of particles, entrance to
exit, night to night,
But the hamburgers,
too heavy to get off their
asses,
Sit there forever.

Thomas Frosch

HALLUCINATION

It's one of those tricky afternoons with middle age. Nothing hurts—except the cramp in the foot on the gas which I've had for years, after keeping it paralyzed for hours at the same angle. But as all you agelings know nothing is quite right either—except the car. The car is right and steady. The landscape is steady too, the way tedium is. Both car and landscape survive by singsong repetitions—mechanisms, not like us who have a sense of positive *ill*-being.

You're supposed to laugh, or at least smile. This is the funny part to prepare for the grand conclusion about art and mutability and all sorts of banal themes considered anew, a metamorphosis, one of those tricks that poets do well and thus transcend the raw stuff, like this experience my body played on me as a joke which I exaggerate and tell you as a lie. So please: relax and smile.

It's about three, my metabolic ebb. Station W something or other in a small north Indiana city pours the week's most teen-age hits into the oblivion of my wrinkled ear. Isolation from mankind congeals around me so that one syllable would be crazy talking to myself,

and I'm afraid of going crazy,
so I sink into my hurried hulk
hurled eastward through these prosperous farms
near Angola which might as well be
Topeka or anywhere along
an interstate anywhere the same,
through tune after unimportant tune —
the driver anywhere the same who
feels no speed, no weight, only my cramped
foot fixed on the accelerator.

Then we begin—a first communique
from my skipping heart, which skips and calls
for my concentrated thought, which is
“Oh my, it's going to turn off again.”
Vision narrows. My focus goes out,
in, out, while my ears . . . All I can hear
is the heartbeat spacing itself out
and feel is blood pressure in decline
and slow vertigo. I do those chin-
in-the-air swallows like you do in
elevators, but my ears won't clear.
A hot flash spreads from my chest. Panic.
In my mouth I taste terrible metal.
I fail. I faint. I smell the boggy.
My hands clamp on the wheel and turn numb
and I am dying, Indiana.
A last twitch flutters in my tricep.
Why? And disappears. The whole world does.

A voice, in mid-clause somehow, tells me
“ . . . number three out of four in a row . . . ”—
that Top-Forty hustler hustling on
while I revive from my void and that twitch
resumes and occupies and shakes my hulk
and me as both surface in daylight.

My heart starts up, and in my fingers
I find a cigarette half smoked down
that I never lit because my rule
on superhighways (boring detail
that it is, but proof) is a cigarette
only every sixty miles or more.
That proof makes evil-smelling oil ooze
from every pore. The trance is scared away.
I turn the next brainless hypnotic
teen-age hit off, act my age, and spend
what's left of this tricky afternoon
trying to figure out how I'll live
underneath this large faint-hearted sky.

Still: at forty-three I am alive
and adrenalized. I switch back on,
search up and down the dial, up and down
for something to reward this keen taste
that I've been maturing all these years,
and threadbare Tschaikowsky comes static-
clogged but better than juvenilia
or than silence—all these busy men.

As they play, I notice that my foot,
because I'm still in shock, aches no more.
The foot pays no attention to fear.
The foot forgets pain, friends, and we now
can begin the transcendental half,
instructive and glorious. They play.

I correct the tuning but in that
hairline blur the sleeping beauty wakes
and disappears. "Come back, come back here"
implores my haunted ear. When I find
where she was, a male voice explains that
we'll continue, that that was the Phil-
adelphia, we will continue with the

Philadelphia, it's Ormandy,
and Saratoga Springs last August
while I listen and cross the frontier
(Farewell, o twanging Indiana!
and congratulations, Buckeye State,
for having brought in this Higher Voice
with whose every seaboard syllable
my car, flesh, and blood accelerate)
—and that furthermore this afternoon
it's Tschaikowsky all the way, an all-
Tschaikowsky program with next the Fifth
Symphony. And my proud taste inquires
“Why does Eugene Ormandy at *his*
age play this stuff?” but my snobbery—
decades of *not* listening to his work—
my snobbery threatens to dissolve
even as the crude semblance of those
first famous bars arrives through my four-
inch speaker. Hearing in this car is
to music as a picture postcard
is to standing in a place you loved.
Nevertheless, I am astonished
to supply each incident before
it happens in the orchestra and
in detail I supposed that I'd cast out
at twenty-one, at which age I had
nourished on this man's music for years
but then, at that age and ever since,
I decided I'd outgrown his views
that are adolescent as my heart
was when it discovered and loved them.

Now, at this time (last August and now:
early spring) in this place (that upstate
music shed and here, now: I90
in Ohio) Eugene Ormandy

is playing for me an old maestro's
sage rendering of the commonplace
with two dozen incoherencies
so built in even he can't hide them
and enough rubatos to make you blush
and certitudes. They overcome me
in the pure, old-fashioned way they feel,
though crudely heard, and lift up my heart,
my changeable and forgetful heart
that dances on ahead of the worn-
out tunes and has become the hero
once again of ideas peculiar
to Romantic Man. My car lifts up
to an illegal seventy-five.

I take off my hat to orchestras,
to Europe, to Peter and, o yes,
to my boyish self who's waked me up.
He lives. His name is Peter and not
far from Toledo, Ohio, he
stays at a patron's country estate
on the road to Moscow and all day
senses musical equivalents
for "doubts, complaints, reproaches," shilly-
shallies, jublations in the midst
of life, that makes no sense otherwise.
The boy is weeping. He hems. He haws.
He struggles free, He glides. He is truth.
He assails. He loves transcendently.
He is a golden militant who
does his good and hums. He saves. He's me
and thanks you, Eugene Ormandy, for
making clear why thousands in earnest
paid you to resurrect their young hearts
last August in a nighttime that smelled
of far-off stables, lawns and huge trees,

mineral springs, 1888
when the first audience heard these tunes
and each of the thousands of springtimes
fresh tonight in the nostrils of each heart
which grew up but, to its great relief,
didn't change except in size and has
never been other than the same heart
after all, with these fond lineaments.

Hi, Peter L.B. Tschaikowsky Noll
sitting beside me in the gilded
concert rooms of Mother Russia and
inventing today these dances of
the late 19th-Century heart and I'm
in ecstasy again for the first time
driving across the steppes of Mother
Ohio whose space lifts me like a hawk.
I am falling in love with my job,
with my crazy middle age, justice,
virtue, the idea of landscape, with
Mnemosyne mother of all the
muses who overthrows time and loves
me back, and more certainly than ever
with my lover, who loves me back,
and with the trumpets sounding in my
immortal blood. I have forgotten
that I died twice an hour ago,
for all good things gloriously are
as they were and for the moment I'm
free to be innocent forever.

Bink Noll

TWO POEMS**Poem To Comfort My Sister**

1.

May wind
sets the edges of Chicago
fluttering, almost as if the city would lift
off the map and skitter
weightlessly, its zip codes tumbling
through metaphorical lottery drums.
May sun, May foam,
May high-tide lines
inched up the beach
in intersecting parabolas.
Gulls' beaks shear out
a perfect circle of air,
let it drop, stitch it back.
And I'm
eye-level with kiwis, feeling the world
smacked damp against my belly
catch the breeze
in a tremor that's what ruffling
is to a silk babushka.
This is the day
Chicago could snap its plumbing
and levitate,
tousled, transparent, if not for the hospitals,
*
funeral parlors, jailhouse backrooms
splattered with trachea-blood and spit,
marine recruiting centers, padlocked
orphanages with eyes inside window-glass
emblematic of burnt-out bulbs, insane

asylums, TB sanitariums shaking
 a leaf in a cough, a tree of coughs, and every
 darkened doorjamb waterlogged
 with a wino's pea-colored phlegm
 or hooker's nightly volume of ten-buck come

*

weighting down the city's corners.
 Each rust-speck has its gravity.
 And even then,
 no babushka, a scrap of butcher-paper
 perhaps, Chicago could shake itself
 free for a moment and waft
 up a manhole's steam

*

if I wasn't bent, pressed recklessly down
 on all glass-lacerated fours,
 the dirt beneath my fingernails
 the heaviest thing in Illinois.

2.

This morning, a dream of our father
 bloated, like pigskin, under the reaming-knife.
 This evening, the trance, the stare-at-the-wall,
 feeling each bit of dust
 hit my shoulder, mote on mote
 until it accretes
 in its original shape as a bird
 on a wire.
 Every hour clicked off with the sound
 of a respirator's surrender.
 And

*

in the middle of today's whole fracas
 I stopped at Juneway Beach to inhale
 as much of the long wave-lapped horizon
 as my chest could hold. I write this

to you knowing someday you'll ask me something
of getting through life, why it must be inch
by inch; and then I'll ask you to remember
this, how on an easier day, without a thought
of divorce court or caskets
clotting my mind, I kneeled in sand
as if to print a focal point
for the turning gulls; and, feeling the salt
brined up behind my eyes
in osmotic stability
with the salt air, I stared
down the undulating stretch of whatever
there is to breathe along the curve where water
 slaps sky,
and took my first
really cognizant lungfull,
and hoisted myself through this life
on a frayed rope of air,
a blue rope, unit by unit,

*

and each blue unit the length of my nostril,
and reeled the world's rim in.
This is the epoch of little miracles.
And if the traffic is punctuated with ambulances
and hearses splattering all day
like the death of a genus of insects
against our windshields, still
we musn't overlook to be wide-eyed and thankful

*

our retinas work at all.

3.

Ernest Vincent Wright lifts his pen
from the last wet word of the last strange page
of *Gadsby*, and sighs
through a smile. The word dries.

The year is 1939,
and he's just finished a novel
of over 50,000 words—not one
(and now the smile shapes
around the deep o's and a's
of a belly laugh) damn word containing
the letter e.

*

Now sound of bamboo on palm
poks through the forest. A Tasaday
swings his L-shaped bamboo mallet high
overhead, and poises
a glistening split-second
under the Philippines sun, then arcs
down hard, and smashes
the tasty *natok* starch from split palm.
Blows land daylong
less than a quarter-inch from his feet,
this being the way
his father taught him; that night
he squats in his cave niche,
removes the orchid-leaf loincloth
and gives his body over
to the wind's caress, his ten toes wiggling
a dance on their side
of the line between accuracy and crippling,
his tongue
revelling in a ball of cooked *natok*,
a small joy, a little precision.

*

And Brooks
drops asleep under sodium pentathol,
dreaming his guts
carved out, his rectum sewed
irreversibly shut, his body's stinks

collecting overnight from now on
in a plastic bag;
and wakes
colostomized in the bed
beside our father's,
to find himself again
not dead.

*

This is the epoch of little miracles,
Livia, take what you can get.
Gull, does your beak snip?

—I surgery air.

Will it hurt?

—The waves are anesthetists.

Sandpiper, sandpiper, drill me deep.

—Fish-mouths are holes, but the lake goes on
living.

Livia, don't be afraid.

Each time we feel the pain spade under our
hackles,

something's working right.

4.

Listen:

Livia, don't be afraid.

One night, maybe, you'll wake to the cold
shoot of air across your shoulders
though the windows are locked. And then you
musn't

wring your sweat from the blanket-fringe
in fear, or think a touch like that anything
but my caress. It could be

*

one day you'll be walking the beach,
smiling, sneakered, hair amazed
in the wind, when you'll suddenly see yourself

against the blue
as if from a gull's perspective, and realize
how thin the cohesion
that keeps the atoms of your hand
from lifting into the air.
And you'll know lakewater
for what it is, a touch, maybe my touch
organized less tight;
you musn't tremble at this.
Or maybe
you'll thrust your arm in the air
and feel one atom
deep in your palm hum clearly
in affinity, and rise like carbonation
through your lifeline's crease, and free itself
into atmospherics;
and you'll walk on, aware, an isotope
of who you were
last minute. On a day like that
the edges of this smudgy city itself
could be so tenuous, lose themselves in brume,
metamorphose. Do you doubt
I'll be there to comfort you?
Listen:
even now the water's aerating
foam around sandpiper legs.
Slowly lift your fingers and scent
*
the gas you could be,
the light perfume.

Forever**1.**

He woke to the realization of his body
trying to balance its heart
between the kiss
still puddled on his lips like a gloss
and the nail-rakings scraped down his back.
Such touch could smolder
holes in the floor-planks.
Her empty dent on the bed was still warm,
and he spread his palm on the linen
where he judged her left breast had burrowed
against the cold, and beat til morning.
He thought of that: the sheets
used to be redolent with her drippings.
The night they flipped through the album
his heart thumped
inexplicably at the photo of her nosegay
caught, a round red blur
fixed chemically on square paper,
no longer
something to wallow the face in,
nostrils flitting like bees
from bloom to bloom, black wings
humming up the forehead.

*

In the knife-blade she was thin,
all neck, all ridge. In the creamer
she bulged, a dollop of pink on its silver surface.
She paced
in the zoo of these aluminum cages, no handle,
no dish ever empty of her,
no setting of service ever reflecting more

than an extreme she could warp to.
Sometimes, before he woke
and lumbered in, she'd stare at her fingernail
for minutes—today an hour passed—
to see her smudge of face reflected on something
warm once, with blood behind it.
The day the morning went in circles
she sat doing nothing in the love-seat
but turn the ring on that finger
around her knuckle, over
and over again, as if it were a control
to tune the waiting face in
clearer.

2.

*We've all come to a country house
so old, the doilies seemed spider's work,
the air kept cross-country-long
in our suitcases whooshed
from out of our sleeves and trumpeting pants legs
like a wind along the sills,
and the teeth in the glass
on the upstairs bureau
seemed wet with a deeper water,
a well-water
bucketed up from substrata.
Here, one could find the encyclopedia
turning bituminous under its dust,
choose a volume,
and flip through the stiffened necrographies
to the boutonniere,
brittled, dreaming a buttonhole,
pressed between the yellow pages
so flat,
it's another entry.*

3.

The pines fenced in the family home.
The honeymoon night, he'd carried her
through an aisle of pine, up the wood steps
and under the bedroom lintel.
A moment only, kissing her
fiercely between the knotted jambs,
they seemed a wood engraving
emblematic of Marriage,
and then broke out of that pose
to the hand-hewn bed, its mattress green
as beginnings, and made pine creak all night.

*

Morning: the trees still there. They stood
by her birthday, by Christmas, and every
anniversary
rooted further in. On bad nights he dreamt
of his parents below them, his children
stretched in the bedrooms above,
and he and his wife rayed laterally out
from a monstrous vertical pith
whose only gods were the seasons.
That was the dream;

*

and waking, some mornings, he thought of the
house
boxed in
like a portrait, its white cheeks rouged,
in a fir-wood frame
on a wall
set in timber.

4.

Leg bent
by a sudden log on the path,
the boy fell face-up,

his twisted bone
the locus of all consciousness
in an evergreen forest.
Green needles
stitched his eyes up, the pain
was that intense
and at one with the landscape.
The sharp, glint-green coniferous tips
speared through the loam like arrows,
he could feel one barb prick his leg,
at the ankle, a sawing, a felled tree
revenging itself.

*

That, of course, was long ago,
decades. And such a memory seemed out of place
at the family Christmas reunion.
Only
passing the tree, on his way to the kitchen,
he thought again
of those perfect trunks: stately, eternal,
painless thrusts to the sky;
and he'd been proud of his aching.
He saw, once more, his hobbling home,
his crazied cripple's maze of a path
limped and hopped
through the resinous evening,
wobbled and danced
over tripping roots. That was the summer
his voice cracked too,
then deepened. When the leg healed, he knew:
even limping,
even broke beyond use,
to be malleable
in a superstructure of straight limbs
is a freedom.

5.

It was snowing; the firs were glazed
 and perfect, the house almost perfectly
 iced in. She came in the kitchen door,
 gloves off, her nails frosted,
 her fingers slow and dull with the winter.
 He saw her, from where he watched, boil water
 and wash her hands in its steam, and stare
 at her face in the kettle until it shrilled.
 And even then, the whistle a pain, her hands
 continued
 wrestling each other:

 the five fingers
 she blew kisses with, combatting the hand
 whose reflected faces
 seemed gnawing out, fanged,
 from behind slats.

6.

*Such stillness laps in black whisks
 at the porchstoops of a small-town night,
 these white-board houses seem the tenth
 of iceberg we've seen in science texts.
 The sleeping bodies are long, silver
 flashlights, brains frozen
 shining forever; and the dream of one's the
 bouquet
 hung lit forever
 above the dark bottom tenths
 where the bride's fling's still poised,
 half caress, half a clawing.*

Albert Goldbarth

**AS IMPERCEPTIBLY AS GRIEF:
ANNOTATIONS TO A LIFE OF DICKINSON**

We were never intimate Mother
and Children while she was our
mother—but Mines in the same
ground meet by tunneling and
when she became our Child, the
Affection came.

Not what the stars have done,
but what they are to do, is what
detains the sky.

— from the letters

I *scattered observations, spring, 1883*

On hills farther than you can reach
 night hammers
the last dark wedges of light
 into the earth.

You remember your mother's face loosening,
 its fossil lines less rigid.
She is beginning to tell you
the real names for things—
 sweet gale,
 fox-grape,
 cinammon fern.

The words crust at the side of your mouth.
Beyond, the flowers of the swamp rose
 clot on their stems.

You do not notice the water shrew
scurrying over duckweed,
the small flames of the fox's whisper.

Over your head
the parched branches of an oak
have cut through darkness
like abandoned mine shafts.

You begin to remember
how the mayflies flake wildly onto
the lighted windows of the house.
In a few hours they die and
the pond distills that death.

Now, marshgrass defines the wind.

Your cocoon tightens.
Starlight burrows into a stand of trees.

Between two clots of grass
the feathers of a dead sparrow grow
as stiff as the dry
kernels of a pine cone.

To the right, where last Fall
the underbrush was set afire,
antlers of brush
knock against the dark.

A hound examines
the spongy lungs of a dead rabbit.
In their bright barbed eyes
you can count the narrow deaths.
You think: what tracks follow
the long intestine of this fire's light?

Listen: your coiled ear
wraps around the smallest sound.

Adder's tongue,
liver leaf,
blood root,

a dream begins to sprout in the
charred light of these words.

II *perishings*

Your breasts are filling like milkweed,
 you are tired now
 walking your twelve years
down the path lined by maple,
 the new leaves
just sprung from the branches,
 the path cramped with
 a thousand insects
 questioning your neck and face:
there is some unnamed desire which
 walks behind you
 like an empty pair of shoes,
and you would know it as you know
 the new rocks that have risen
 from the fields after mowing
 like bald heads or knuckles,
 the dream which clings to you,
 this brown burr
 which sticks to your dress in passing,
 this bending back
 toward earth
as the long grass does after rain.

Now, each stone becomes a wish.

 You hear the whirr of a bat
as the black fist of his body opens,
the green salamander sifting through grass.
Sunset: planks of light splinter,
 shatter to distant fragments.
Once again, it is death the small
 hinge of a sparrow's wing.

Here, the early fireflies hurry
over the stalks of wild celery.

 You lean back
 against your own darkness
naming fox-tail, bur-reed,
 watching the red squirrel
curl like a burning leaf on the wind,
 the moth preen itself for
 a moment you only imagine.
Your firelight falls as heavy as rain.
Small bruises of light stick to the trees.
 Near the pond's edge you
 can hear the water bubbles
breaking in an otter's wake like eggs,
 the racoon hunching slowly
along the swollen rim of a hill,
stumbling through the reddening ground fog,
 the low, smudged light,
 the dark distilled in roots,
 this quiet ovulation of the sun.

III *beginnings*

 The days turn topaz like
 a lady's pin.
It is morning again,
 the ticking bells,
the frogs prattling in ponds,
 the pods of flame
opening in the far woods,
this light a sudden musket spills.
All week the caddisflies have risen from
their tight streams, preparing to die.
A wind interrogates the daisies.
 And so, you begin now with

the usual lists of clay—
 indian pipe,
 cowbird,
 cattail,
each name its own disguise.

Above, the bony scream
of a hawk holds off the sky.
Behind you, the bats still
shift in a mob of trees.
They have gathered scraps of the wind, and now,
 complicate the shapes of branches
 with their small wads of darkness.
It is your own dream which fumbles there.
 You want to say again—
I am out with lanterns, looking for myself.
 You watch as the hawk soars,
 slides down near the sky,
see beyond the edges of those wings
 the corridors of light.

Light wrinkles on your hands.
This morning the seams of an empty field
collect loose dust.
The tips of hemlocks open like blinds.
A cat sips from a wheel's rut these
distances he cannot forget.
 Here, you cannot remember
 the real names for things.
The tiny midges are aimless as ever,
 and now an otter,
the dew glistening on his fur like sweat,
slips as this poem does
into a dark tunnel of
the words we thought we owned.

Richard Jackson

TWO POEMS

Grit

"Think of someone worse off 'n yourself,"
snaps my mother.

I droop on the couch.

"And wipe that look off your face!"

What look? I try to go blank.

Brandishing a mop,
she thrusts her face into the doorway.
She looks like the puppet, Punch.
"If there's anything I can't stand,
it's a *baby*."

She retreats to the kitchen.
Wham! goes the pail.
Splat! goes the mop.
The theme for today:
Tenderness is taboo.

Fumes of ammonia drift towards me like a noose.
Bang. Whomp. Swat.

Cora, my older sister,
brushes by the couch.
Out of the side of her mouth,
she says, "Think of snowflakes."
Then she goes out the door, to school.

The Punch-face pokes around the doorway again.
"I wish you had just *half* of that girl's *grit*,"
it huffs. "She's been twice as sick as you, for
three days; threw up from the soles o' her feet;
cleaned up every mess by herself. Her face is as

yellow as butter, but she goes to school, anyway.”

I wilt.

“You’re thinkin’ of *yourself!*
Think of someone *else!*”

She pops back into the kitchen.
More ammonia. Another mother would
be laying a soft palm on my forehead . . .
offering pale tea or orange juice.
I should be glad she doesn’t try to soothe me.
Her hands are like alligators. (“*When I was
sixteen, I asked for some lemon hand cream
for Christmas,
and my brothers pissed in a bottle
and give it to me. Ha. I laughed. I can take
a joke.*”)

Re-enter, Alligator:

“Why, where would I be if I thought
about myself? In the asylum, that’s where,
or in the grave. What would you do if you
had my laxeration floppin’ between yer legs
all the time, *huh?* That’s what I’ve had to
put up with ever since givin’ birth to Cora.”

I’ve heard this a hundred times. I picture
a cubed steak, of moderate size, flapping from
her crotch. Her big bloomers accommodate it.

Exit, Alligator, to the kitchen.

Sounds of huffing and puffing and of the mop
bludgeoning the cellar steps.

Somewhere, nuns are saying their beads.

She calls out: “Dr. Tenbrink said:
‘I don’t see how you stand it, Mrs. VanZandt.
You could sue the doctor that left you in that
shape!’”

A chair topples.

"But I don't think about my pains.

I think about Minnie Huyser. She's nearly
seventy.

Her organs are hanging almost to her *knees*.
Think of *that!* Someday they'll pull the bladder
right outa her!"

Splat.

I picture a wad of chicken parts
on a purplish thong, like a pendulum,
tolling away Minnie Huyser's days.

Another noose of ammonia.

The toilet gulps down the pail of mop water.

*("You're no good! What'll I do with you?
Huh?*

*Shall I throw you away? Huh? Aw, wipe
that look*

off yer face. It's just a game!") Memories of
playful baby-days.

Now the odor of Fels Naptha soap.

My head throbs. My eyes sting. My throat
feels "laxerated." The washing machine,
in the cellar below me, growls with its
hugged prey. The wringer squeals.

Re-enter, Punch.

She thrusts a glass of water at me.

"I spoil ya. Cora got her own, always."

She points to her temple. "See that?"

I see nothing.

"Bumped it on the corner of the cellar door.
Isn't it red?"

I nod.

"Soon it will be a lump—purple,
green, blue, I'll forget about it.
Ha!"

That *look* has come over her face.
I brace myself: Here it comes:

"I hope you don't turn out like your Aunt Marie
—layin' there cryin' in that asylum. Hell, a nurse
oughta slip her a dose of somethin' to give her
a *real*
bellyache . . . 'n make her clean up after herself.
Give her sumpin' real to cry about, huh?"

Snowflakes on Aunt Marie.

"Think of Aunt Ida. Her with a tumor like a
grapefruit in her side . . . 'n others like a bunch
o' grapes in her tit. She goes right on workin'.
Yer cousin Freddie: hemorrhages from his
nose like
cranberry sauce. He goes on drivin' that truck."

—her speciality, in technicolor, like a slide
show.

Uncle Abe: skin disease like raw hamburger
all over

his neck . . . Aunt Elsie: goiter like a hen's
egg . . .

Aunt Doris: wad of fur the size of a cantelope
in her

appendix ("an for years, her mother *told* her
and *told*

her not to keep kissin' that cat!")

"Think of Uncle Pete's sinus trouble:
Why, to look in that man's handkerchiefs,
you'd think he'd blowed out his *brains*."

Snow . . . snow . . .

Sikes told her once of a carnival where
they saw, among other heroics, a man
pushing his
nuts in a wheelbarrow: elephantiasis.
Snowflakes . . . snowflakes and morning
glories
and lilies of the valley . . . cover that
wheelbarrow.

“And don’t forget Uncle Klaus; the doctor in
the prison hospital.
told him drinking is a disease.”
She taps her forehead. “Is it swelling?”

I nod.

She lunges at the curtains, shakes them:
testing for dust. Knocks a picture askew
on the wall. She’s getting hopped-up now.
This sublimation-stuff exhilarates her.
“And the doctor said: ‘Why, Mrs. VanZandt,
if you don’t have that laxeration operated on,
you’ll not last another five years!’ That was
when you was born—eleven years ago. And here
I am,
cleanin’ the house. You know *why*? Because I
think
of OTHERS!”

She snatches the Hoover.
They whiz around the room together, like a
dance team.
“Sadie Morton!” she spurts. “Think of poor
Sadie Morton!”

Sadie Morton: Dead of cancer last year.
Snowflakes. A blanket of snow on your grave,
Poor Sadie Morton.

She’s glowering at me.

Has that babyish look seeped back into my
face?

“I don’t know what will become of you, Girl.
Just like yer father. Just like his sister Marie.
Three sissies.”

I turn my face from her, waiting for five-
thirty,
when my father’s mournful glance will
confirm
my misery.

She slams the Hoover into the closet.
Her glance re-evaluates my face.

C minus?

She points a pistol-finger at her calf.
“What’dya do if *you* had legs like this?”

I make myself look at that bunch of marbles
in her stocking.

Jabbing that gun-finger: “What’d *you* do, huh?”

Shoot it?

“Speak up. What would *you* do if you had
these veins?”

Wear slacks? . . . I shake my head, woefully.

A smile twitches at her lips.

I’m up to C plus?

“I don’t give them a thought. I think of others.
Right now, you know who I’m thinking of?”

I shake my head.

“Hank Plow. Did I ever tell you about Hank
Plow?”

I nod, but too faintly.

“Hank Plow had his arm tore off in the cutter
at the
paper mill. Gangrene set in . . . ”

A blizzard of snow around you and your
green stump,
Hank Plow.

“Then Hank’s brother, Ernie, he had this terrible
accident—”

I lie there, imprinted: her *tabula rasa*.

Those colored slides, which have rendered me
catatonic,
have filled her with a helium. Billowing with
borrowed
sufferings, she seizes the step ladder.

“I’ve a good mind to wash that ceiling!” she
sings.

She mounts the rungs: Minnie Sadie Pete
Halfway up, her red Aryan hands take a swipe
at the beige lampshade: Marie Dad me
“My lump’s turnin’ green now isn’t it? Ha!”
She soars to the ceiling
and scrubs the stains from her heaven.

Low

1951

“I hafta count the cars,” she says,
her hooked finger jabbing the November air.

“Count the cars?” I say. “Why?”

"I *hafta!*" she snaps.
 Her head pumps to assist the finger.
 "—14, 15, 16—"

We stand shin-deep in snow,
 hunching under a renewed squall.
 Cousins, aunts, uncles, my sister Cora
 and her husband are scraggling away
 from my Dad's fresh grave.

"But *why?*" I whisper
 as I take her elbow to steer her away.

She wrenches herself from me.

"Now I lost *count!*"

The finger finds the place in front
 of her face and resumes the poking;
 the head pumps more earnestly,
 "—23, 24, 25— Sikes 'n Agnes always
 count the cars, and if I don't, they'll be mad."

Sikes: her dwarfish oldest brother,
 pensioned after forty years of janitoring
 at the state asylum; hence an expert on
the mind. Agnes, her oldest sister,
 yellowed and soured among doilies and
 ouija board.

Embarrassed, I stand with her.

All the others have left.

The soggy flakes are chilling my shoulders,
 but she is rooted here: the widow, age
 fifty-nine,

turned off, as ever, to her husband, of whom
 she had said all those years his symptoms
 were

accumulating: "His imagination; he'll outlive
 me

'n marry a young woman with big tits. Agnes
 says so."

— who babbled, even as he lingered, a mere
 pelt stitched
 over his cancer: “Brought it on himself.
 Brooded.
 Sikes knows a lotta cases like that.”

The cars jerk away like starlings through the
 slushy cemetery. I look down at the wet
 chrysanthemums
 beside me.

“—34, 35, 36— Oh, I *hope* I got it *right*.”

Sikes stumps towards us: a toad-man made
 even more
 top-heavy by hat and cigar: “Hey! Git in
 the car, *you!*”

She flops along behind him like a hooked fish.
 “49—no, maybe 50—or 51?” she gulps.

“You crazy?” he snarls. “Agnes got 43.”

Over my shoulder, I say goodbye
 to the wet chrysanthemums;
 then fold myself into the flivver
 with their bickering.

Agnes wags ochre jowls, fixes cinder-eyes
 upon my mother. “Whassa matter with you,
 Katie?

It’s 43.” Within that mound of urine-scented,
 wine-colored velveteen, I can feel that other
 statement steaming (“*If you don’t git holda
 yerself,*

*Katie, Sikes ’n me’ll hafta put you in the
 asylum.*”)

Before it can boil out of her mouth,
 something fresh
 from the chrysanthemums leaps from my
 tongue:

"Take her straight home," it says.
"She needs a rest."

They retreat like turtles—all three of them.

I should have known:
No sooner am I alone with my mother
than she hisses: "Won't you never learn,
you college girl? You gotta make yerself *low*."

All evening, I watch her lips fumble
through that old pack of phrases for just
the right one to present to that pair
when they drop in to check on her tomorrow.
I can guess what it will be:
*"—I brought it on myself: You both warned me
more'n thirty years ago: That's what I git
for marrying that GERMAN."*

1933

"Phooey!" she squeals.
"That's what I think of it: Phooey!"
She snatches my all-A report card
from the kitchen table, whips it to her fanny,
and wipes.

Nellie, my schoolmate, cackles.
Her card is a bramble of D's.

With spider-fingers my mother approaches
my long taffy-colored curls. She yanks one loose,
spits on it. "Buh! 'Beauty's only skin-deep!'"

Nellie, whose hair is the color of mud,
hoots her on.

I hold my face rigid as a cameo.
I am ten. For ten years I have been
rehearsing for these scenes.

Later, after Nellie has left, my mother

will whisper, "I didn't spit hardly at all.
I don't want you getting stuck-up.
It's bad to git ahead o' yer chums.
Something bad always happens to them that use
the mind too much. In the biggest wing o' the
asylum, they're packed in like cattle: doctors
'n perfessors that burned out their minds."
Her blue eyes dart. She taps her own tawny head.
"Runs in our family: Marks mostly them with
light hair."

Fear? Anger? Shame?
I feel a minimum.

Evenings, as I sit in the living room
across from my dark father and my dark sister;
he, silent with his Bible;
Cora, silent with her sewing;
I, silent with my school book,
my mother will push a prodding finger
across the 'bituary page of the newspaper.
"Sara O'Conner. That could be the Sally O'Conner
that was my teacher. Seventy-eight; sure that
could
be her. Kidneys. All them O'Connors bloat
somethin' awful with kidney trouble . . .
She had it in fer me 'cuz my mother was dead
'n I had lice 'n my brother Pete was in jail
'n my brother Dan put turpentine on her cat's
hindend.
She called me 'Kitty' 'though she knew my name
was Katie, just to cheapen me fer the boys
'n she'd slap my hands with that ruler 'cuz
I was Dutch 'n couldn't talk good 'n couldn't
learn
'n didn't wear nice dresses like the 'Merican girls.
Shit, Miss O'Conner, the meaner you got,
the more I prayed fer you . . .
Clyde Wagner. Bet he's related to Henry Wagner.

That Henry stoned Sikes right on the head.
 Sikes was bleedin' somethin' terrible, but he
 jist called out: 'Henry! Henry! I'm gonna pray
 fer you!' " She glares at my father, sticks out
 her tongue. He does not look up from his Bible.
 "It don't take no spirit just to stick yer nose
 in the Bible. The real spirit is when you pray
 through yer own blood fer yer enemy!"
 She thumbs her nose at my father. He does not
 move.

Twenty years of rehearsals:

He's a better cameo than I am.

"Maude Moyer. My, my.

Agnes worked in the papermill

with a Maude Moyer, or Moynehan

'r something like that. A real pretty girl:

fair complected, nice teeth, big bust.

Thought herself a little *above* the mill gang,

though . . . so she become a Cathlic nun.

Well . . . she started rammin' them candles

up her you-know-what. She hit a certain nerve

that made her shake all over 'n that affected

the brain 'n she was put in the asylum.

Sikes knows all about those cases."

We sit there, prim and pure

as three mirrors, tripling

the grotesqueries of this

turpented Kitty.

1972

"This peacock-welcome for *that*?"

my husband whispered.

He was shocked that I'd cut our prize

chrysanthemums for this round-shouldered,

twenty-year-old file clerk, picking her acne,

blinking at the carpet with familiar eyes.

It was Cora's daughter, Rena, who had

smuggled
herself a thousand miles, by bus, for an
abortion.

"She's a telescope to my own girlhood," I snapped;

then choked back from him that scene:
My mother's twin brother—rancid, scruffy
Klaus,

leering at Cora's budding sweater . . .

lifting my skirt for a spank . . .

We flee to the kitchen; stand blinking at
the floor.

Mamma smirks. "I s'pose *you'd* act better'n
that

if *you'd* been locked in the Coop three years."

Cora and I exchange a sneer.

"Don't snub him," Mamma warns. "You
may have

a son worse'n him someday." She dashes
to the pantry for boiled potatoes.

"Run to the cellar for a jar o' wax beans!"
she commands. We scurry.

"—and a jar o' mustard pickles! —'n that
grape jam!"

Last month: this feast for Pete, hiding from
the game warden. Last summer: soup bowls of
cottage cheese for Dan, nearly gutted from
canned heat.

"Don't tell yer oldman!" Mamma hisses.

At the stove a-sputter with salt pork
and potatoes and coffee and beans and eggs,
she starts rocking and stomping and blatting
her lullabye:

"Oh, the Niggers 'n the Irish

They don't amount to much—"

Klaus ambles to the kitchen table.

With spatula and spoon, she makes
pat-a-cake motions to him.

“—*But still they’re better’n
the gol-darned Dutch!*”

The paroled face splits like a rotten fruit,
showing brown stubs, like seeds, in
mauve mush.

Her face splits, too, into tears.

He was her son long before we were her
daughters.

Now I found myself whispering to my sleek son
and daughter:

“Be kind to her, Jonathan . . . She hasn’t had your
privileges, Jill.”

To thaw their frost, I brought out the sparkling
burgundy;
baked round loaves of bread . . . stuffed the
picnic hamper
. . . sang old Dutch songs . . . coaxed Rena to
sing, too.

That night, in bed, my husband scolded:

“She came for an abortion, not an exorcism.”

I sighed. He was not watching through that lens:

My mother, in cahoots with those Skid Row
brothers,

dreads those *other* males: boys our age:

Americans—

tall, with white teeth and cars.

With her knee, she demonstrates, repeatedly,
just where to strike them, and *when*.

(She *knows*. Sikes has shown her.)

My husband and our children had to endure
her

only once, years ago, for twenty minutes.

They’ve

spent as much time watching the orangoutang
at the zoo.

Cowed Cora drags her brood to Grandma's
every Sunday.

It was from those twenty years of Sunday sessions
that I yearned to yank the cord in Rena that
might

unpucker my own pouch of pain. "How about a
farewell picnic on the Potomac?" I asked.

My glacier-husband requested a tray in his den.
Jill and Jonathan exchanged that sneer.

So: Into the gouges scraped by those three exits,
I poured sesame rolls, cheeses, Cold Duck . . .
flowers and songs.

. . . On a sunny rock by the Potomac,
with the white mum in her hand like a kitten,
listening

. . . Rena loosened. Through her voice, through
her

grimaces, leaking like pus through her
gestures . . .

came that oldwoman, now eighty; sole survivor
of that family of ten.

I saw those ochre jowls, stashed with that
deeded venom

. . . saw those inverted lips nibbling . . .
heard her muttering:

"My Cora, she knows her place . . .
but you take that younger daughter—bah!
Got greedy for college 'n that *high* stuff.
Married a perffessor: a 'Merican. He writes
poims.

Suicide: It's stamped all over his face . . .
Well, I brought it on myself: Hardly ever
punished her.

When I did, her Dad upheld her. With Cora,
I did
better. It's easier to hit a plain child . . .
But that second girl, she had me stumped.
She was so fair 'n dainty 'n she learned so
easy:
just a baby when she could say her numbers
so clear
'n the letters 'n all the colors. I admit it:
I was proud. Sikes saw it. Agnes saw it.
They warned me. They tole me to whip the
piss outa her.
Just once would do it, they said, twice, at
most,
to break that German pride . . . But a
mother's heart
is soft. Oh, I hit her" a shrug. "—a coupla
times
when I caught her actin' snippy in fronta
the lookin' glass; I hit her: just a *tap*.
Did she cry! She'd have nothin' to do with me
after that. Nothin.' Run to her Dad fer
everything.
How's that for bullheaded? Two of a kind,
them.
I was just dirt under their feet . . . Well,
never mind.
Oh, if I had it to do all over again, I'd whip—
No. You see sometimes in the paper a poor
mother
that got started on her kid 'n couldn't stop . . .
I tell you what: If I had it to do all over again,
'n They was passin' out them bright little
towheaded
baby girls again, I'd just say NO THANKS . . .
'Course I pray for her. Night 'n day, I pray

for that girl . . . But the mistake's been made:
I was dumb. I let her put herself above me.
I s'pose she's still flyin' HIGH . . . And of
course,
someone else will have to do what I didn't do:
Sure, someone will put her down LOW . . .
just wait 'n see."
A slow shake of the head. A sigh. "What I'm
so afraid of
is that it will be her kids that will do it . . .
Yeah,
it will be her kids . . . Just wait 'n see . . ."

Friday, with a yellow mum abloom like a sunrise
on her shoulder, Rena departed, by plane.

Saturday, our glamorous Jill,
playing the lead in the school play,
started to flounder on the stage . . .
slushed her lines . . . and flopped like a hooked
fish
towards her brother in the third row.

She sits now at the hospital window,
tapping her finger in front of her face,
pumping her head . . .
She's counting the cars in the parking lot.

Jonathan tells us: "I guess I gave her
some bad dope."

My husband has no comment.
Now he is the cameo.

I cannot sleep.
My bladder floods.
My crotch stings.

Mamma! Call off your prayers!

Karen Snow