

Dancing at Tipitina's after the Flood

My husband frowns because I don't stay home anymore. Sunday afternoon, he is planting new crepe myrtles, or painting over brown scum waterlines that ring our house. I take off for Tip's to waltz in the arms "of God knows who," – Bernie says. "Whom," I correct him. "You're wrong," he says, "it's who." Whatever.

Sundays at three, it's the Bruce Daigrepoint band. They've played every week since the children were really children. April, 2006, Tips reopens and I am there, like clockwork. It's down the street past weary houses and yards of car corpses. My best friend meets me there and we Cajun jitterbug with courteous country boys and crazy, middle aged bachelors who ask a different girl with every song. I spin 'til my vision tilts, and I wear my fresh, post-Katrina now-I-can-dance skirt, and my mind fogs over stale thoughts of bidding building contractors and that dead end "Road Home" program. Sunday, after three, no more putrid trash piles in the street and no yellow barricade police ribbons around the suicide house of the week.

I look over the rounded shoulder at my chin, and see a sea of used up faces that just stare back. The dancers become a wave of sweaty, mindless bodies that rock–sway, rock–sway into muddy water. My nostrils fill with the scent of red beans and rice and stale beer. Daigrepoint's voice calls out; Gina Forsythe's fiddle cry cuts back and forth above our heads and I sway in the blue arms of "God knows whom."

City of Hey Baby. (Finishing Line Press). Fall 2020.

Tattoos and Birthmarks

Joe showed me his heart with the dagger, a cross, a swastika, all bleeding like algae on his thick freckled boy arms. Don't mean nothin', he shrugged, bowled the ball down the lane crashing the pins as his pregnant wife drank sprite. No more pitchers, she said as she kept score in the little squares. "Take it, Toeper," Joe handed him the ball.

Toeper held the ball in his right, beer in the left, and an etched eagle drew taut and dark across one shoulder. Toeper launched the ball and slobbered Coors over the lane. Last pitcher, the manager scowled as he mopped at the slick.

A scarlet birthmark stained half of Toeper's face. I never heard the name before. Black hair hung straight into his ink eyes, as he told me he swigged his first whiskey at two. His country grandparents laughed, called him *Toeper*, drunk in Choctaw, the only word he still knows, and the grandparents are gone.

At 3:30 a.m. the manager threw us out and Joe's wife cried in the parking lot to keep the keys. I drove Toeper to his house where he pulled his loaded father out of the ditch and stumbled him inside. Toeper led his father to sleep in the mattress on the kitchen floor, the bed was Toeper's. Driving home, I climbed the bridge, staring into blackness. Coasting down, cars passed me, and I felt like I was in one of those dreams where I can't stop--no brakes, none of us has brakes.

Green Briar Review. Fall 2013: Issue 1.4. 3rd prize in Federico Garcia Lorca Poetry Prize. (Judge: Sean Thomas Dougherty.) December 2014.

City of Hey Baby. (Finishing Line Press). Fall 2020.

Dead Woman Winter

Button found a dead body this morning, a homeless woman. He said he had met her before, someone you would remember, he said, a midget. I don't know Button's real name, like we haven't worked together long enough. He doesn't know my nickname, like we haven't known each other long enough. I can't understand what it feels like, to go from fretting about small things like hands rough from the dry, freezing wind to actually freezing to death outside on the pavement behind the fire station, townspeople passing on foot, cars sputtering by, unaware of a shelterless woman who lays there, dying by the curb, no rescue in sight. All doors stay locked and electricity flickers off and on.

Today, a woman-child came to work with us. She just got engaged, she squealed. At 19 years old, she must complete 43 hours of public service for her crime. She said she did something really bad but won't say what, and I don't ask. She is writing letters to someone in jail but not the guy she just got engaged to, who she says her mother hates. Her fiancé, whom she is forbidden to see, will take care of her, she chirps, though right now

the man-child lives with his parents.

We ask her to wash the inside
of the windows. We find
floors for her to sweep--we don't
want her to work outside in the killer cold,
this tough and vulnerable teen.
Perched in a chair, she offers to show
me a picture on her phone of her
boyfriend, but I won't look. I pass to her
some paper and a clipboard, tell her to list
all the things she wanted to be since
a little girl. She litters the paper
with dreams: veterinarian, police officer, nurse, baby-
sitter. I wonder how she went from life as
a baby girl with dreams to a woman who
just wants to be taken care of. I tell her
to pick two careers and write the steps to get
there. To her, I am a torn book, discarded bifocals.
She will become a shunned girlfriend, a nameless
divorcee, a lost wife, a roaming woman, wandering
behind a fire station on a frigid night, all doors
shut tight as the unpredictable
winds slip beneath her coat.

Erline

You tossed that red ball high
onto the tin roof to watch it
bounce, then roll, roll, roll down
caught in midair by your ready small hands.

Imagine the sound inside, the bounce
bump, bang irritating
impatient adults. They scolded you
in French, then snatched that ball
to feed into the fire
until flames blazed and smoked,
a searing hunger never satisfied.
That December they withheld your
Christmas orange—the only gift
you ever received.

They could not know
who they were dealing with,
a girl who became a woman
who could perform magic tricks
changing a loaf of bread *poof!*into fourteen servings of *pain*
perdu for what seemed like twenty
mouths that fed forty stomachs
and transformed small hungers *poof!*into explorers and homesteaders
that occupied this land.

They could not know that you
held that red ball inside your
gut from which escaped quiet
flames of song, French hymns,
sweet lullabies, swing tunes
from the radio--melodies
escape your lips like breath.

And now, look at you sporting
your mauve jacket, lips tinted rose.
You balance upon a livingroom chair
hanging maroon sheers over
sunlit windows to accent a beaded

Patrice Melnick

burgundy lamp that hangs there
suspended from the
ceiling like a memory
caught in mid-air.

MockingHeart Review. September 2016.

Walking through Palmetto Swamps

For Olan

Walking through palmetto thick swamps
he whistled loud and shrill.
A feathered soul echoed back
and forth, back and forth they spoke to each other.

I hauled a huge cow skull out
of the vines, lifted it by the eye socket.
He said as a child he collected those
we laughed that one day I might outgrow this.

He offered to carry the skull, but I couldn't bear
for someone else to lug my mud-crusted finds
Later, I wondered why I'm too proud
to share the weight of these bones.

I've never loved like this, he said
never use *love* in a poem, I said
but when he looked away, I cupped my hands around it
afraid the chirping find might fly with the next breeze.

He once tried to bury me with the spiraled cat.
Pride flattened in the bottom of my boot
I crawled out of the grave, clawed at his feet
until he let me curl back into his lap.

Will I be in your book, he asked
never use *book* in a poem, I said
never use *poem* in a book, he said
I turn the pages and he has already
whistled his way in.

Ghosts of the Past Live Here

There are ghosts up here, she told me
Old nuns of the convent, bumping into walls
playing jacks with the rats.

They taught school in long dresses
carried stern rulers
collars buttoned up tight.

She asked me if I heard anything,
Just rain on the roof
the rattling gutters
the air conditioner hum
cutting in and out

She said a book fell off her shelf
said a door closed in the empty hall
said she feels something
in the air around her elbows

I said they must be friendly ghosts
one corrects my grammar
in the late hours

Another spirit whispers ideas into my ear
She tells me what to write now
tells me what to tell you

One shadow woman tells me to button up my collar
Good-night, she says,
carrying some of my books
Tomorrow, more rain, she hums

Awa Speaks

The first one *Babba* picked
was old with dripping chin
and snagged breath, so I said no.
I have time, got an A in French this year.
Babba says a good head
makes a good match.

Zeneba learned French
songs from the radio, listened
to merchants squawk
until she understood.
Babba picked a good one for her. "He's good-
looking enough," Zeneba told
me after the second time
she met him. She gave him bread
and coffee, and he laughed
into her neck, when *Babba* wasn't looking.
She will be his first wife
when he returns, but still
she waits and every time she sees
a baby, Zeneba squeezes
like it was hers.

Dana can't wait. She's flunking
French, hoping *Babba* will find
a tall one, black as the back
of night. She watches
Zeneba sew, watches me study.
Hers will be smart, gold-rimmed
irises, dark hair, arms
like river vines.

Dana imagines a baby
named Hamat wrapped up
on her back with almond
eyes like hers, hair
like his. She will stir
the *gunja* and serve
her husband seconds. Later,
she might command a second
wife, a third.

I wrap my books
in cloth, to protect them
from the pouring mud
the September rain.
My French teacher gives me extra
verbs. I read about the earth's curve,
poetry rolls in my head
and I fight with the boys
for a place in front.

Babba's picked a new one for me.
He's young, they say, teeth like coconut
reads French and Arabic.
Babba says when he takes
me, I'll be free from these
verbs. *Babba*, I have time.

Open Market

Me and Zeneba go
hand in hand
to the market

Like a child, I can't
count in Arabic
can hardly talk
my clothes are ridiculous.

But Zeneba says I'm nice

In an odd sort of way
likes my pale skin
and those pants of mine
she says I'm alright.

Blue and white
cotton runs over
her head and shoulders,
and down her back in flawless folds,

She handles the avocados
squabbles with the fabric man
the bread lady, then
they clasp hands and chatter.

Zeneba walks that tall kind of walk
between stalls and holds
her shoulders haughty
like she's carrying water buckets on her head

Zeneba and I walk
and the boys, the men
see us and do
like they do

They hoot
and cat call
kissy, kissy
WOMAN! WOMAN!

Come on, Zeneba, I say
my eyes down
fists tight

But she laughs
this tobacco spitting
kind of laugh.

Ala yeké kiri kiri,
she makes the crazy sign.
They shuffle off.

Zeneba grins,
the bag of bread and avocados
steady on her head.

Fainting

I roll down old highway 66, wind blowing
in the windows, dark spots of cactus
I spin the tuner dial, but pick up
nothing, no country, no jazz
no Mexican polkas, no "Kicks on
Route 66" and the darkness closes in like
a cat's inner eyelid. Into the hills
still no radio station and I slow,
downshift, remember

Rosco, bus driver, when I was in the 4th grade.
"2nd gear" Rosco said, I pulled
the stick shift back, "3rd" he called,
"2nd". Sitting on the steps,
in my red sleeveless cotton dress, I cranked
the door open and closed, as hot
April air blew through the open
windows of the bus that creaked and squeaked
down Thackery, Edgemere, Hillcrest.

In the back of the bus I saw
the red-curl'd freckled boy squeeze another
boy till he collapsed, eyes fallen closed.
The red-curl'd boy brought him back,
lifted him to this feet, and let him stumble
groggy-faced, to his place. Bus stopped
at a red-light, I ran to the back, knelt
on the seat. "I can make you faint,"
freckled boy said. I stood, and waited.
He stood me in front of him. "Breathe in,"
he said, "Out, breath in, deep, out,"
I saw the arms reach around my waist,
"Breathe all the way out," and it all
went black for seconds or years
until I felt my head against his chest
his hand on my forehead as he helped
me up from the floor. "Wow, pretty
neat," I said, stumbling to my seat.
Rosco slammed on the brakes,
stomped to the back. "Stop it," he said
in the boy's face. Rosco stomped back
to the front and we grinned

embarrassed, pleased, and I
awake again in the cooling
dark hills, think of the mystery of
black outs, when the radio stations
grow faint, and you hear your
own sigh or feel the breath of darkness
whisper in your inner ear.

A Woman Tries on Shoes

When I was six, I sat
in my room and caressed an imaginary
pronghorn antelope named Geronimo
and he understood what it feels like
when you don't feel real. Even so small
I knew I wasn't meant for this world.
I rode like an Apache, rode that deer
for years thundering through pale green classrooms, turning over tables and chairs,
startling the glass-eyed teacher. We trotted into hamburger joints, head shops, 24-hour
grocery stores, service stations, midnight movies, light shows, city parks, parking lots; in
and out of jobs where I misfiled, mailed late letters full of misspellings, wrong addresses,
crooked labels.

Geronimo nuzzled my palm as I crawled
in and out of muscled arms that embraced,
let go, let go,
until I really came down

to drive some dented Buick that bucks and backfires, loose steering, bad mileage, cracked
windshield--this is the dream where brakes don't work, I can't quite fly, friends don't know
me, I can't speak the language, I speak but no sound comes, I hide nude behind bushes
searching for my clothes, *my* clothes.

I want to walk among you who finish your classes, go to your jobs, home to husbands,
wives, lovers, closets full of clothes in your size. But I stumble

find myself neck-deep in pronghorn
grasping at bold stripes

strong antlers
flat black eyes.
I hold on for dear life
let go of those parched cars, numb classrooms,
sour jobs, puzzled mates and stores where
even my feet are too wrong to fit
new leather sandals that squeeze
my toe, hurt my soles
rub raw my soft instep.