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Pantomimist, [poetry]

Malinda Finney Briggs
The University of Montana

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THE PANTOMIMIST

By

Malinda Finney

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Approved by:

Madeline De Fries
Chairman, Board of Examiners

John B. Stewart
Dean, Graduate School

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THE PANTOMIMIST

I drink air from a glass spun
by my hands out of a ball of air.
Sidewalks, stairs flow from the soles
of my feet. I auctioned my locks,
door and window for, whatever thieves
choose to take, my body recreates.
Each night the thieves creep in
(I know, I see their scuff marks on the floor).
The refrigerator's been let down
on thick ropes to the street
and though I pretend I'm not, I'm growing
thin as the air I eat.
They have stolen my bed
and the man lying in it.
On the varnished wood I sleep
wrapped in a sheet left by mistake.
My hands mold his shape more perfect,
sculpt his face less round.
They have left me this perfected lover
and I roll on the floor in his arms.

THE DEATH OF STRANGERS

1.

The death of strangers
turns our lives over like rinsed cups.
Our sadness pools, evaporates.
What's to be learned from this sadness?
We notice being overturned
we are more stable
though always empty.

2.

Every time news of death
reels into the editor's office,
Doppelganger, you go looking for me -
peeking under hospital sheets,
opening cooler drawers at the morgue,
finding only the captured.
Lover, I'm still on the loose
hiding at the kitchen table
scribbling with my fractured hands
a list for chicken stew.
I would call you back,
roof beams shivering
with the crack of plaster and gauze.

3.

I'm sorry. I cannot help.

Doctors called me to identify her
since she had forgotten herself.

But no. Perhaps if we met
moving through familiar rooms,
touching desks, beds,
faces of friends, of past lovers.

I'm sorry I cannot help -
the hands seem so familiar
white from the wrists,
ink staining the left thumb and index.

JOURNEYING TO GRAND JUNCTION
(To Roy Harris for his Third Symphony)

Mr. Harris, I know you wrote
measures of Kansas prairies but
what I really wanted to do was
catch a night train to Colorado -
the Portland Rose -
through a snowstorm to Grand Junction.
Pushing against the blindness of mountains
just the engine
and a sleeper with empty compartments
not even a dining car attached.
I could talk to the engineers
but even if I leaned
against the wind-sealed door
it would open only a fraction
letting in the frozen dark that lunges
at the snow coated train.
We may never get to Grand Junction,
I am comfortable
and it will be a long time
before I am hungry or lonely.

FAINTING

Stiff in the library
chair, fingers
stapled to arithmetic,

electric tongs
grasp her heart.

Beat! Beat!
they command
and her heart
convulses

convulses

angered,
startled from peace.

Where was the heart's
privacy? The comforting
hug of lungs?

Package of flaps
and valves, compartments

anxious for the next
blast of blood,

where was the skin,

bones that promised
protection.

What reason
these heart shocks-
bloody fingers

of the tenth grade projectionist
who wheeled Mexico

and Thomas Jefferson
through the halls?
Or the moon

knocking hard
to warn of the flood?

WAITING

Those chairs drowsing by the fire wait. That one, the worn blue velvet, pouts, thinking it's been forgotten. The cushion, softly impressed with curves and angles, dreams a body. Next to it, the chewed wooden chair, bare of cloth or pad. Sighing, one arm droops. It dreams its wooden wounds healed, its grain rubbed, polished. The vinyl chair, smooth orange, yawns, fidgets. It wishes the logs smaller, less fierce and imagines its skin drawing into black pocks that ooze thick orange. A body would block the heat. When doors open they listen and when the floor creaks. They hear furnace-rumbles, house-groans, the shift of rubble - crumpled sheets, smeared dishes. What is it leashes dreams and trains them to patience?

MACHU PICCHU
for Jenny

I

When the earth ripped like flesh
something of stones must have drifted sea miles
buried in each wrenched half
until it bulged behind Cheops' eyes
into limestone sepulchers and, centuries later,
unfolded from Viracocha's fingers
into a citadel. Refuge for masons, farmers, potters.

II

Granite blocks unmortared, locked together
tighter than the knees of its virgins.
What man held the lever, knotted the cords,
dreamed twenty-ton stones into terraces,
roads, temples? Would he have dreamed so well
had he known the final persecution
would leave only the virgins
rubbing their bodies against the white ashlar,
all the secrets of their priests and grandmothers
dying with them?
Perhaps he dreamed of Neruda,
keying words instead of stones,
and went out the next morning to finish the last wall.

III

Years late, he climbed their secret mountain,
became the forbidden scribe.

Have you been back?

They've built a hotel on that mountain.

Press a razor against someone's straining throat--

the contractor or a workman

who drove concrete up the two-lane asphalt.

If it's not too late crush your pens

between two stones.

GRANDMOTHERS DYING

We carry in our selves,
in that deciding chromosome,
memories of our grandmothers' beds -
soap washed linens, faded stains.
As if by chemical signal
we know when they are dying.
Bodies pale,
translucent as fetuses,
they rock in those beds
until nothing remains but the blue design
of arteries and the patterned stains
beneath their bodies.
Staring up they do not see us.
They would not have guessed we were here
but for the glint and jingle
of our long silver earrings.

THE SECRETARY

I typed every letter twice,
three times. The wastebasket
fattened on my mistakes.

The Catholic camp Director,
expecting morning glory,
unwrapped opium incense.

"Where are you?" my employers
eventually asked. I wanted to lie,
to say, "Writing poems"

as if the file cabinet would fall
into order, the typewriter resent
the Dear Sirs it spat all day.

There was no respectability to my dreams-
I lay between a man's sheets,
or read poems to friends

who clapped until their palms
swelled with appreciation.

I could not explain the resemblance

between the subway's black mouth
and the mouth of a derelict
or explain the one legged cellist

to the high school orchestra. The wood
warming the inside of her left knee,
she bowed her cello

until her body numbed and fell away
leaving low notes to fill the void.
I could not explain,

my typewriter hummed, the janitor
emptied my wastebasket
twice a day.

INITIATION

We pour death
like water into
an aluminum pan we hold
against the ceiling with
a broom. We call her
from the livingroom saying
Here. Hold this broom please.
We leave her,
staring at the pan,
hands white
around the wood.
We listen
to the bristling.
We wait
for the slip,
to see her surprise
when the pan tips
spilling our beautiful
gift down
into her face.

WOMAN DOWN THE HALL

The woman down the hall
carries the names of past lovers
in envelopes sealed for so long
she has forgotten what was inside.
Evenings she stands in the hall squinting,
holding each envelope up to the light.
Sometimes she sees their faces-
pasted over the face of the boy
carrying her groceries up the stairs,
 (he climbs ahead
 feeling his eyes swing
 back and forth back and forth
 with the rhythm of her hips)
or masking the face of a stranger
mirrored in the shoe store window
 (he glances but the wing-tip oxfords
 interest him more
 than her indefinite form).
Like their names her lovers' gaits, stances,
bodies never come back. She would need photographs
to see them again.
Even then she would have to say,
"Please, tell me your name."

THE VIOLIN

Only yesterday the news came to me.
I found it on the doorstep, rolled
parchment tied with cord.
Unrolling the cracking paper I read:
Uncle Knute died you have inherited
one violin bow and a booklet,
"The Finney Fingering Method".
Too bad I don't have a violin, I said.

This morning the news came to me.
I found it on the doorstep, folded
newspaper held with a rubberband.
Turning to the reviews I read:
Miss Finney's Violin Recital Best Held
in Carnegie Hall, her fingering delicate,
precise but so soft as not to be heard -
Too bad she didn't have a violin, it said.

THE RELIC

St. Louis' relic doesn't bridge the river.
It noses into air
inhaling the exhaustion of drivers
caught in the ooze of traffic.

Those drivers
despair losing sight
of the arch
in their rear-view mirrors.

And the mirrors
stare back
in disbelief and envy.
Resigning themselves
to rectangles,
they thank their efficiency
which reflects
rather than twines sun
and twisted steel.

Envious of motion the arch
strains its foundation
wanting to stretch

across the neutral river.
Since few come to wonder,
programs rolled in their hands,
it straddles the yards
sweating, drunk
with factory intoxication,
angry at being stranded
on the dirty south bank.

The mirrors
glare and blink
and the arch stares back
seeing in each
confining piece of glass,
hundreds of small steel arcs,
shining.

COTTON FARMER'S WIFE

Alone thighs spread wide
she dreams the fields
those sections of desert
that yielded to irrigation canals
and her husband's care
Watching for years as yellow flowers
grew tight green buds
that swelled burst white
she walks the rows
tearing off bolls and flinging them
into the dirt for her husband
to find as he lies
naked among the rows
running his hands
over the warm moist belly of earth

LETTER TO FRIENDS

Dear Amie and Jennifer,

It is April and snowing,
my husband
has gone off to drink with friends.
I have a cold and am home
swallowing aspirin and Coke.
Nerve-ends popping and whistling,
numb brain humming,
I'm a calliope,
one-woman band,
the straightener
of magazines,
the lint-picker
harassing corners.

Tell me - how is life
in Toronto? Does snow
blind the returning birds?
And Sao Paulo?
Do the starved leaves
swing up to the ground

or do they float
down into winter's void, brushed
from the shy
face of earth?

Amie, have you decided
in whose bed you will sleep?
Jennifer, have you cut the road
through the Amazon?
When we love
we are vulnerable as fingernails,
too soft
and expecting the insistence
of teeth;
too brittle
and meeting rocks
beneath the soil.

Friends, write soon.
The days roll out their tongues
snatching our lives
from the slender stems
and leaves we creep along.
Write soon

before these distances
warp our lives
beyond recognition.

CANADIAN CROSSING

Lugging exile back with us
we begin our journey - Niagara
where love, like shredded wheat,
is found in neat pillowed bundles.
The guard, detecting the silence
of our eyes and stomachs,
knows we are not hungry
for bungalows by the Falls,
bowls of drowned cereal,
so he searches my guitar
for what went up in smoke
days ago.

ORIGAMI

1.

On a morning cold
and waxen as a new widow
I build a fire.
I read the morning paper
then fold it
into a bird I nest
on the logs.
It flies up the chimney.

2.

It is inevitable - each morning the mockingbird
flies against the window screen.
Bored with his own
old voices he wants to
switch on the TV.
He should be content
to sit in locust trees
hearing the raucous
cicadas buzz.

3.

I go to answer
the doorbell and find
morning's dead husband
leaned against the wall -
his finger jammed on the bell
and the bird, proud
of his new voice, perched
on his shoulder
buzzing.

PABLO

why was it I always found you
sitting cross-legged on the ground
your long white fingers digging
and curling into the earth like roots?
I believed you would grow leaves -
tiny moist buds that would open to sun.
But your father, angry at finding you gone again,
would stamp across the fields
and jerk you up by your arms.
How your root-hands have hardened
in the sun and air.
They seem too tough to absorb
the mysterious juice
that once flowed in through them.
Hanging by your sides, they curl
and uncurl, still wanting to feed
their dry brown stalks from the earth.

NEWS OF DISASTERS

"There's no need to wake you or disturb you
with telegrams or thunder."

V.V. Mayakovsky

There's no need
to read or listen
about the world wrapped
in bandages.
There are new wounds each day.

There's no need
to wake you
or disturb you
with telegrams or thunder.
Each telegram reads the same.
The operator
tosses your reply
into a barrel, lights
her cigarette and throws in
the match.

And thunder rolls empty,
leaving a vacuum that holds cries
in its airless mouth
until they have faded,

then spits them out,
small hailstones
on the leaves and grass.

WINTER IN THE AMAZON

It is winter in the amazon now:
icicles cap the crocodile's teeth,
the orange trumpeter vine curls
into itself like a snail -
like the snail trying to wriggle
into frozen ground. No more
than a bump under snow
his shell cracks, the warm meat inside
goes small and black - black
like the three-toed sloth hanging
frozen from his tree limb,
lips gaping pink at the corners.
"I should have gone north,"
he said just before the snow
closed over his gentle curved nails.

THE HALL OF MIRRORS

Cloning - "We have the awful knowledge
to make exact (genetic) copies
of human beings."

William Gaylin

We began

in the garden

with peas and carrots,

then frogs,

rabbits,

finally man.

Women,

we are relieved

of that nine-month weight.

Take out the nucleus

of an egg,

implant the nucleus

of a cell.

Agitate.

Implant

in nutrient medium.

Here we stand
in the Hall of Mirrors.

Whose hands, these?

Whose nails,

and hair?

In this carnival's last

beaten building

the wooden floor

does not send back

our reflections.

We are trying to find

the exit but everywhere

we collide

with ourselves.

Center ring, the plumed horse,

for reasons of his own,

grows three toes again.