

SMALL

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ENTERPRISE



Black
Lawrence
Press

For the cities we left behind.

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WISCONSIN WAS OUR CALIFORNIA

Because your days were tethered
to oversized moths, or bleeding aluminum
awnings, we could only go so far

as the train would take us. Those summers
nothing but radio and damp sheers
picketing the front window, imaginary

nuns I used to fold out of tissues.
At first I thought your body was dirty,
like cinema velvet. You had an alligator

spine in the foyer. I had to slide along
the floor to not wake your mother. Christ
himself was stationed on a plate

in the living room, painted by distant
grandfathers who earned the chin you split.
I counted the constellation of pinholes

surrounding your knee. You thought
they were charming, but you also loved
to press your cheek into the wing

of a moth, or its twin that existed inside
my body. I was a spill of trashy pearls,
not even close to fully formed.

RISK MANAGEMENT MEMO: COMMUNITY OUTREACH

At first it was like one of those riddles
they assigned to keep us busy, like soldering

the white parts on a panda, building half-
boats / half-men that could reproduce themselves

with a little encouragement. I wished for
an earthquake, and it happened in ceramics so

everything that was destroyed should've
been destroyed anyway. It was a compliment.

In Lars von Trier's version of my history
I would have occupied more than one bus seat.

But I was past the candy age, and this
was a colder sort of country, which sets its girls

loose in 305-square-foot occupancies
furnished with yesterday's dormitory regalia

and suspicious electrical outlets like
pornographic slot machines for the very small.

And the social worker has her own
heavy troubles, so it's not out of line to offer

to fix her braids in the back, or put on
a pot of coffee with a shaky West Side press

which can do other things, much like
you or me, and that's called *dimensional* by

the checklist (the mild version thereof),
and I wonder if eventually checklists become

extinct in this story, and you'll just think
hard of the only lady on earth wearing red wool

and she will start buzzing your buzzer,
which is just two wasps interlocked on the floor.

BREACH YEAR

The world does not need any more music
or teenagers. My life was not hard

so I made it hard the only way I knew
how. Someone was selling color televisions

on the street corner. I used my calligraphy
skills to trace square boxes in razor

on glossy magazine pages. I was nineteen
and had a permanent coin locker

at the bus station. Sometimes benches
smelled of bleach, like the Chinese laundry

behind our old apartment. For a few weeks
my crumpled sweaters were charming.

If you wait for a city bus long enough
it will begin to rain. I was neither the best

nor the worst, somewhere between
haunted caterpillar and sexy beginner witch

in the costume section. I was skipping all of
my classes but was not signed up.

I packed beer cans into a pillowcase, traded
imaginary bracelets for cab fare.

In some neighborhoods, I was a census taker, not statistic. I once owned a gloomy

old saddle horse. I once had much more black tea than I could ever drink.

ORDINARY CITIZENS

When you are taught never to taste
the merchandise, it's a pleasure trip being sent

into the night, even with parallel bags
of trash, or a full wastewater barrel, some bats

exerting their freedom in what passes
for a tree. If all you have is a fire escape, climb.

Unless you are me, which means afraid.
Is it better to pace a hot floral living room, safe,

or to throw both shoes off a roof?
I was so good at what they called *the tidying up*.

A favorite apron. Maybe I ironed it.
In my dreams I wasn't dreaming, made change

for ordinary citizens. The math didn't
terrify so much as the way customers touched

as if at a funeral, or a taxi stand in snow.
At midnight I walked my uniform past windows

displaying luminous green scarves.
You could pack one into an empty Mason jar

and light an entire block. How many
nights of bleach would it take to make enough?

They always say to work your way up,
but I wanted to drop each master key into a lake.

My friends arrived late to the party.
They were so ordinary all my wild stories died

before I could tell them. One even
brought an awkward twelve-pack of Old Style

like people would be guzzling instead
of dropping lit matches on broomstick skirts.

Somebody carried a retriever up
to the roof. Two women grappled a little, then

collapsed onto a deflated raft. Not
that I would know, of course, from below,

keeping potpourri company.
Circulating the contents of a leaky red cooler.

My freedom was somewhat like
a joke the hostess recounted involving a hen

and a runaway donkey. Maybe I was
the empty corncrib, sole wagon wheel left behind

when the hen figured how easy
it was to launch herself onto a stranger's back.

RISK MANAGEMENT MEMO: THE SERVICE INDUSTRY & YOU

Once you get over the whole “three hundred mouths
daily” hang up, work in an industrial dish room

can be much like all that sex you took for granted
back in Oklahoma, where there was little else

and even the old redbud was considered puritanical
in its seasonal desires. Or perhaps the forks

that skewer you daily are not direct and horrifying
reminders of the smallpox vaccination scar

you mistook on a man of yesteryear as his stubbing
out a blunt on his own arm. Silk screen his

likeness on all your t-shirts from 1982, and a flame
is all you need to recreate the great bowling

alley inferno that left even the most prophetic local
stoners bereft. And when you storm out

on your antepenultimate day on the line and scream
about your art, nobody knows you had any.

Except maybe Darius and his mysterious sugar bowl.
Sometimes teenagers run away and towns

hold a farewell parade with abundant paper streamers.
The man with the scar misused the term

“Rococo,” but he did it playfully, like to start a fight,
so that is why you’re still silk screening

his likeness on the bay window of your underpants.
There are all kinds of people you can

partially waste your life with. The woman slashing
her boyfriend’s tires might have suffered

through several hundred butter pats and overdone
dover sole, or its sexual equivalent.

Sometimes it’s not the force of hot water that holds
all the juice glasses in obedience.

THE YEAR IN STYLE

When I met the machine that eventually would replace me, all I thought was how it filled the room with sun pools and erroneous static. We both shrugged and then I walked to the bar with no jacket, because why not? The place had fish tanks in the walls, years before anyone had figured out how to work that, so seasoning packets and straw wrappers bobbed at the edges. I told the bartender I wanted to look at the ocean, even if it was unfashionable and pedestrian of a local to assume the role of tourist.

A month later we'd be completely snowed under. A terrible man would walk my names (first and last) into an ice bank with foot stomps worthy of an ancient vineyard or military police hoedown. I ran twenty blocks carrying a blender wrapped in sheets, hence the illusion of a fleeing comet. I was on the Broadway bus phoning the police. I simultaneously wanted to marry and destroy the statue of Goethe. As a child I had called it my father. It was too late to purchase all you can drink tickets for the New Year. I was the new year. No, I was even newer.

RISK MANAGEMENT MEMO: MEMBER APPRECIATION

The mushrooms were only college mushrooms.
My baton was homespun, ineffective.

Let's say somebody builds a boat from scratch.
Someone else arrives home scratched

or otherwise altered. I took in an inch or seven
along the bust line. Let's say five

and call it almost even. I wish I still had that
body, though this one knows more

important things: how many sighs in a night,
why never salt, tarantula math.

I was in love with a man because of his brick.
At this point I was made of lake.

Maybe I had stolen a sled, left my very best
cardigan on a westbound bus.

Perhaps I showed him both breasts, upside
the angriest half of his head.

He had a mind of politics, a crooked red
house with stiff chairs, shameful

blankets like a spinster. Let's say we made
the idea of a fountain feel wet.

At a certain point I stopped going to work.
Then I even stopped calling in.