

ABSTRACT

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THE PRE-RAPHAELITE EFFECT

Lindsay Bernal, Master of Fine Arts, 2007

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This collection begins with love and ends with death. It attempts to depict melodrama in a fresh, musical way, as the speaker moves through personal relationships and various cities: Lowell, Massachusetts; Queens; Brooklyn; Venice; Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia; Washington, DC; and finally, Acapulco and a remote beach town on the Oaxacan coast. Place is its own character here, perhaps the second-most important antagonist. The primary antagonist, of course, is the self.

THE PRE-RAPHAELITE EFFECT

By

Lindsay Bernal

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Table of Contents

I

AFTER GRADUATING MAGNA CUM LAUDE FROM MR. JEFFERSON'S UNIVERSITY 2

SONNET WITH A BUS IN IT 3

INTERROGATION AFTER VENICE 4

HAIL STORM 8

JANUARY IS DIFFICULT 9

INTERROGATION AFTER *THE CREMASTER CYCLE* 10

POSTCARD FROM LONG ISLAND CITY 11

II

HOME 13

ALBA: BENSONHURST 14

POEM BEGINNING IN SNOW & ENDING IN ESTRANGEMENT 15

ULAANBAATAR 16

POEM WITH ANOTHER TITLE IN IT 17

OUT 18

III

LAMENT ON A BRIDGE 20

INTERROGATION AFTER MANHATTANS 21

LAUNDRESSES IMPLIED 22

POSTCARD FROM THE VILLA CATULLO 23

THE PRE-RAPHAELITE EFFECT 24

IV

POEM WITH A BIRD IN IT 29

1457 CHAPIN STREET 30

LOOKING AT A PHOTOGRAPH BY MANUEL ALVAREZ BRAVO 31

DOLOR NOTEBOOK 32

POSTCARD FROM MAZUNTE 36

AFTER GRADUATING MAGNA CUM LAUDE FROM MR. JEFFERSON'S
UNIVERSITY

the conversation gets deep or we're just stoned
more often. then i take off all my clothes
& a plate of ice melts on my stomach.
without a window unit or a fan oscillating
it's too hot for foreplay. what are we doing
in august in lowell, massachusetts, anyway?
the freezer stocked with popsicles
& cocaine in sandwich bags,
nowhere to walk when the sun falls.
how will you waste your graduation money?
premature vasectomy!—so we can fuck & fuck
& nobody gets knocked up.
which philosopher said not to be born is best?
because you'd never forgive yourself
for bringing another into this world
to inherit your problems & spend
holidays with your folks.
not another trip to jack's grave,
not another toast to moriarty by the tracks.
when your construction gig ends,
when my contacts solidify in the city
shh! that car alarm could be a cicada
telling us something, something we should hear.

SONNET WITH A BUS IN IT

A wreck, I walk the length of the Ames parking lot.
You're thinking sex, my body growing small in the rearview mirror.

I smoke cigarette after cigarette to forget everything I've left behind:
a noose of pearls curled against the carpet, my nightgown

still clinging to the bed, how many un-had conversations.
I understand the beauty of revision better than you think.

In the new version you're regretful, I don't pull out my hair—
even before the woman across the aisle offers me a wad of Kleenex

I'm over this: the drugs, your charm. Through the Greyhound window
the sky slowly unraveling has nothing to do with my face,

swollen as a child's after a tantrum. The view is not beautiful:
to the left the eternal strip mall, to the right a dirty river,

that statue made of garbage, the landscape repeating itself
until Elmira, where your car dies and it's cold.

INTERROGATION AFTER VENICE

At this hour of bruised sky
and mosquitoes ravenous—I mean,

how are you? All day in Dorsoduro
I was distracted by laundry,

trying to piece together a story
out of strangers' underwear,

sheets blown stiff in the sun.
I sat too long in the same chair,

sweating. *No grazie, no grazie* in lousy Italian
to the waiter returning and returning to my table.

Eventually I made a list of all the Titians—
the first Virgin in red, voluptuous—

but I couldn't rouse myself to sightsee.
If you could see my feet

pocked with these weeping bites
that itch like the devil—

that's what I get for getting lost
in the wine-flushed dusk.

How quickly a crooked street blurs,
goes quiet—only the dull lapping

of water, the rare call of a gondolier.
There was a rushed introduction,

the Giudecca stretched-out, sky-colored,
some food stuffed in a basket.

No, I've never been attached,
infatuated, in love, but not attached

(unless I missed something in translation).
I remember breaking a glass, not in anger

but by accident, his tongue in my ear.
Then the crowd disappeared with the pigeons

that would eat from my hands if I let them.

*

The waterbus just passed San Vio's soap-smooth posts,
where crazy E.P. nearly threw *A Lume Spento*—

the whole lot of it—into the Canal Grande!
By "crazy," I mean dejected—pre-chicken-coop,

pre-St.-Elizabeth's. Forgive me if I'm being repetitive,
it's so sticky today, maybe I'll throw myself over

despite the stench—like Chinatown in July—
but the breeze makes the air bearable.

A cathedral wouldn't be cooler: incense,
confession, guilt. Don't trust the brochures:

under the vault I felt no closer to God,
and the domes didn't lessen the compression,

the gaping crowd. So many cluttered nooks!
How I wish I were a woman frescoed: sinuous

in a loose dress, dragged by my hair to heaven.

*

Before he took off for Sirmione in search of Catullus
we picnicked on San Michelle,
the lush island-turned-graveyard,
where Pound rests between a laurel and his mistress,
the violinist, whose name was Courage
but is written Olga Rudge.

Is it irreverent to picnic in a cemetery?
What happened was not at all romantic.

Most of the time I felt sick.

What's the difference
between life and art? For Pound the laurel means enlightenment
and for me—it's impossible to be a tree amid the wood in Venice

where there are no woods
and the only trees grow next to gravestones.

But the state I entered was tree-like:

my body hard
as bark, my head floating
farther and farther away.

I was lying on my back on my hands.

I didn't ask for it.

I was counting backwards from a thousand in Italian.

Were the leaves full of voices?

And on the grass a dirty skirt.

*

When the moon blooms her ruddy face

O moon my pin-up

not being able to sleep is worth it.

Wrapped in the scarf

he left for me at the front desk

I stepped out of that airless pension on Calle Soriana

with a plastic jug of Valpolicella

and one hash cigarette.

Who cares about a curfew?

In bed I couldn't quit scratching my ankles—

god-damned Venetian mosquitoes—

half-dreaming I was stuck buck-naked

in a forest thick with mountain laurels

and sparrows singing like breaking violins.

I knew full well when I closed the door behind me
that I'd be locked out till dawn.

To kill time,

to clear my mind

I ruined my eyes staring at an altarpiece:

Mary rising above

all the sinners who are trying to touch her.

The red dress, the pretty blue shawl,

her gaze always God-ward

she can't bear to look down.

HAIL STORM

My hands
I used to
protect my head.

The sky opened
its dark mouth
no hint of red—

I couldn't orient
myself, let alone
see you through

the air that was thicker
than before
we left the Dorf,

when you
planted
a kiss far

from my lips.
Did I hear your
voice, Gerard,

on the other side
of this crag?
Was the last

thing you said
before slipping,
Forgive me?

For what? I
would've asked—
screamed.

JANUARY IS DIFFICULT

especially when it looks this dismal—overcoat gray. And I should be making a long list
of memories for a class.

Instead, for the thousandth time, I'm reading Stein under an afghan, the one about hats.
I can't remember the half-time show or who won, but the last Superbowl party I went to
was 2002—

the day after I lost my job and the day after that—Tuesday—I was proposed to outside a
shitty little bar

in Sunnyside. A full hour in sleet with my head exposed, I waited for him to emerge from
a taxi

stoned, wearing that atrocious aubergine sweatsuit. The bouncer witnessed it—my shame
like a cliché

stretched from neck to forehead. I'd never felt so afraid, afraid of what I could accept,
become: inert

and fat in the bare-bulb light of his basement apartment, a part of the couch, a pair of
blood-shot eyes unable to read—

or worse, I'd end up like Alice Toklas slicing the meatloaf, filling the absinthe glass,
packing and unpacking suitcases.

No way, absolutely not. Come to think of it, we barely ever talked. In truth I hated the
new color scheme:

bright red kitchen, bathroom as blue as the sky would never be, the dull liberty bell
wallpaper soon to be peeled off

so we could paint the bedroom predictably. After the third vodka, when I told him I felt
tender, I meant in the stomach, not in the abstract.

INTERROGATION AFTER *THE CREMASTER CYCLE*

Do you have epic ambitions? Today you rose
from the couch, left the one-bedroom
your dead relatives left you to enter the overexposed
photograph of Fifth Avenue, 1 o'clock.
Did the winter sun shock you?
(A tepid Bud never cures a headache that thick.)
The Guggenheim is always packed, even on weekdays.
Does the thought of testicles descending
and so much Vaseline make you queasy?
Would you rather be stuck on the Isle of Man
with Marti Domination or Ursula Andress?
Yes, they're both hardly dressed. No, Björk's not an option—
she's only mentioned in the credits. It's a difficult question.
If only you'd finished at Tisch, if only
the band had survived the autumn slump.
Miles and his Napoleon-complex
and the problem of too much dope,
not enough square feet or scapegoats.
Don't you want to escape, rewind and start over?
Just think of what you'd have to relive:
bed-wetting, middle school, mysterious pangs.
Look at your companions reflected in the subway window—
quotidian, forgettable, until you recognize somebody
from happy hour in Alphabet City, where you flashed her
a cool smile, then recoiled to an empty booth in the back.
Was it her laugh that drew you or the way her skin
glittered through the haze of second-hand?

POSTCARD FROM LONG ISLAND CITY

The thing is, I kept thinking
it would pass, this thickness
at the back of my mouth,
what shame tastes like
or vinegar. When Frank
wanted us both at once
I almost caved. You were shaking
your head, I was out
of my mind—enveloped
in a green mist rising
from the rooftop pool—of another
mind altogether. What I need
to say about that year
a note stuck on the fridge
couldn't begin to contain.
Today: inexorable
rain, wind that left
my cheeks chapped, burning,
but I didn't call in
sick or arrive late.
On the broken 45-player
I piled more of your mail,
junk mostly, a few bills.
The jasmine plant is dying.
After I tried to suffocate you
with the goose down pillow
I felt awful. Like a woman
I'd seen in a Hopper:
at her bedroom window,
naked except for a pair
of black flats, as empty
and regular as this view.

HOME

Sister Borromeo taught us *HOMES* to remember the Great Lakes. Buffalo was closer to
E, we were somewhere below O,
where enough lake-effect could close school for days. The storm that hit our sophomore
year: two feet of accumulation
between dusk and daybreak in late March, when we drank too much Boone's at Cobb's
Hill on a weeknight
and concluded nothing had changed since third grade.
I wish I didn't have a good memory. I wish I hadn't recognized his beat-up Volvo that
night in the dark
and stumbled toward it to find you sprawled on the back seat, your pleated skirt pulled up
around your hips, while he pissed,
his urine steaming against a white bank. Your body I could handle but not your eyes, as I
stared back openmouthed in awe or was it envy.
I should've held you, I should've brushed the hair from your face but instead—past the
frozen reservoir,
past every unplowed driveway—I walked home counting the mailboxes, my voice like
smoke coiling around me:
Buffalo is still closer to E and we, still somewhere below O.

ALBA: BENSONHURST

Again I've mistaken the jackhammer for a woodpecker
pounding into oak, and the brook is just my neighbor

pouring hot water on the sidewalk to clean up the dog shit—
I wake in a pool of what. As a kid I kept the blinds shut,

plucked my eyelashes one by one while I slept—my mother had
to shake me awake! At least this time he had a head,

though his greasy hair hid his eyes, and a mouth
that moaned so wide I could see down his throat.

Maybe in real life we'd rubbed up against
each other when the N-train lurched.

But I'm tired of that dream, and I'm tired of all my plants
inexhaustibly dying. Even the ficus is fed up

with morning: dismembered from too much,
not enough of something. I don't want love.

If spring is the season of repair, I want the wrecking ball.

POEM BEGINNING IN SNOW & ENDING IN ESTRANGEMENT

after I don't apologize for what happened accidentally in the backyard
after the doctor stitches your head closed
after Mom moves all the snow shovels to the highest shelf
after I do something quiet upstairs without supper
after I whisper the same three prayers
after the last shade is drawn after the dead bolt locks
after I fall asleep easily after all that
because the slate's still pretty clean
the cup full because it's years before things get serious
before you punch that girl in the stomach
with such vigor you knock the wind out of her
& Mom starts weeping uncontrollably *where is your father?*
before I kiss Adrienne Elker just for practice under the big maple
before I smoke Dad's cigarettes before adolescence
before you're the silent, scary type in your bedroom doing God knows what
before I'm a real sucker for peer pressure
taking shots in the locker room with Cheryl
at the deserted playground waiting for those guys to show up
before I find my clitoris before someone we know slits her wrists
& Sister Miriam announces it on the loudspeaker
before you learn to drive before you barrel through a red light totaling the Volvo
before I learn to drive all the way to Niagara Falls
but tell Mom I'm at the mall before your first fuck
on the couch of our old house on Greylock
before my first fuck—if I can even call it that—in Roy's dirty shower
when I confuse infatuation with love & my heart breaks in half anyway
when I confuse destruction with fun
when I have a run-in with a state trooper in North Tonawanda
when I think long & hard about Freud
when I realize how little you have to do with this
when I see you only on Christmas or at Aunt Peggy's wake
when I sleep through the transit of Venus
when I can't stomach myself
when I age another year
when I feel alone when I'm not alone
when the moon looks far when the moon looks close

ULAANBAATAR

Not wet with dew but dust-swept,
a trace of tear-stain. Why weep?

In this deaf desert, the dawn's rawer,
redder. I squat to smell her,

smell mutton, smell dirt.
Her body is bruised violet,

violated. I finger her skin:
corpse-cold. All taxis taken.

A passerby passes, passes.
No phone, no money.

I shout nothing into the sky-void, across
the endless sun-dressed steppe. No echo.

POEM WITH ANOTHER TITLE IN IT

What it doesn't have to do with: not sleeping, not sleeping
together, rain, the villain from a post-Gothic romance
you've never read, the fake fireplace I'm in front of.
If there was passion in the beginning, in October it left.
That chick you met at Johnson & Wales, who claims to be
half-gypsy, is irrelevant entirely. I could care less about her killer
risotto. Even with the all-day construction on Crescent Street
the house is too still. You've played the same scratched record
so long I've tuned it out. If we weren't born jealous
we'd be happier more often. If my face weren't blank
you could tell me to wipe that look off it.

We've reached a juncture that demands expression,
an ultimatum, something hurtful uttered in a hush.
The mouse I've just named Heathcliff skitters under the couch
but I'm too disappointed to stand on my chair.
Building nothing out of something.
The story's the same in the song that's skipping:
in the dark, in summer, a little drunk, everything looks better.
A big decision is rushed. And another. Then the weather, then the weather.

OUT

Driving down Blossom Road just before Christmas—months of snow and salt
plowed onto the shoulder, each squat house festively done up, that tacky reenactment of
the nativity aglow in the DiPasquale's front yard—
I don't know why the same building I'd entered and left day after day looked different to
me all of a sudden
the way the woods you got lost in as a kid seem small and disappointing when you
return to them older
because they hadn't renovated it, as far as I could tell in the December blur, beyond the
slight expansion of the motherhouse infirmary
where the sick nuns, most of them retired teachers, convalesced or passed, where on
weekends I'd "volunteered"
changing bedpans and pouring Hawaiian punch into paper cups, and I hadn't been out of
there that long really, though two years in another state
had proved long enough to lose touch with nearly everyone, except my brothers.
How selfish it is, after you leave a place, to doubt that it could function without you.
Even these short visits home made me stir-crazy, to the point where I could easily blow
up
at my mother or Mark for no good reason at all, if I didn't get air, listen to a loud song
on the radio
chain-smoking, which is what I was doing now in the parking lot of my high school,
facing the grotto we'd stood around singing or just moving our lips every spring as the
elected May queen and her court
offered flowers to the stone Virgin, and before I knew it I was driving away again, fast
and far.

LAMENT ON A BRIDGE

Someone somewhere had a similar problem:
white dress, one foot bare, sky on the verge of rain
in a city where the sky seems always on the verge of rain.
It doesn't matter if what happened happened
in Moscow or Glasgow or here in the present
with nothing to toss into the river but this busted slingback,
my underwear wadded at the bottom of my bag.
On a far walk centuries before Vivier invented stilettos,
Mary Hamilton broke the heel of her shoe.
That detail appears in most versions of the story
but not in the one sung by Baez,
who didn't bother with shoes at all for a long time
and never smoked anything, never drank
to the point of getting herself into trouble or forgetting.
(In my head she's biting a Red Delicious,
slapping her Adam's apple to improve her vibrato.)
Everything went wrong for *her*, for Mary Hamilton, I mean.
And courtship *is* the worst. One minute you're splitting steak & frites,
falling for the oldest tricks in the book against your better judgment—
the fancy-pants restaurant, the phony conversation about boating—
and the next, you're back at his place flat on the floor,
knowing that the night will amount only to morning.

INTERROGATION AFTER MANHATTANS

Is the street melting? I fill my mouth with rain, the taste of vermouth
and metal. Can you hear it—

An umbrella with legs, a voice underwater? My tongue is cotton.
The truth? I don't know

how I walked 40 blocks from Mona's to this forgettable corner
in these shoes.

The hour I lost track of, focused on a squatter's tattoo, another
good times band

playing cover after cover in the back room. No, there are never stars
in this city, only

the false welcome of neon or a half-lit awning to stand under. And the dreams
I've been having—

my teeth disintegrating or he's hanged himself again and I have no hands.
What am I waiting for?

I want to step out of my flesh—I mean, would you help me
out of this dress?

LAUNDRESSES IMPLIED

A sheet made colorless by weather, by aperture,
dangles off a cactus, not a yucca tree.

No washboard, no water, no prolonged sigh.

Before that two bodies slept badly under a mosquito net
after a stupid argument. Despite the wine—some spilled, some spit in the other's
face—he maintained an erection while she ran to the kitchen for salt.

Without him, she felt estranged; without the labor of the house,
she felt estranged.

And bored sick. He had trouble expressing himself.

It felt like love, a thrill, and once, when they were young,
they put their lives in danger to get turned on. It's true:
at that instant when death seemed closest, they finally felt real.

But the plural suggests more than one woman
did the washing, the hanging out to dry. Who folded
and how many and how long was the walk?

Procreate. Procreate. Procreate.

Three heads she pushed out: boy girl boy.
In that order. In his image, then hers.

POSTCARD FROM THE VILLA CATULLO

Sapphire, cobalt, cyanine: so many words for something impalpable.
This morning from the Hotel Eden I could hardly distinguish
between the lake and the sky. It was that sunny.
What do I love and where are you? Fragments—
no, pesto—and you're in the Cinque Terre eating it.
I guess our relationship was meant to stay platonic.
(A stray kiss on a forehead.)
Did you have a real cool time at the discotheques?
Why ask questions if you already know the answers?
The bird Lesbia caressed, pressed to her chest, is dead,
but yesterday I looked and looked for it regardless
beyond Riva's cloudy peak. Then I drank a coke.
In the ruins I smoked half a pack of Dunhills.
What thou lovest well doesn't always remain.
Since you left I've been to paradise. I'm broke again. Write.

THE PRE-RAPHAELITE EFFECT

1

Mid-afternoon, the hum of porn fills the room:

 a red-head in a diaphanous catsuit
(love-bite on her breast-swell),
fearing no bondage,

 no slap of the whip.

Foreplay and more foreplay and a song sung on the soundtrack.

"Amber Lemons is from Jersey, not Malibu,
 went to Catholic School."

How do you know that?

Then she comes twice

 nose-down like a small animal

 in faux grass by the kidney-shaped pool.

Is she faking? Is she faking?

2

Paramour—that's what I'd like to be called.

If we hadn't skipped so many steps at the start
you'd know my mom is part-French.

And *hate* isn't as simpleminded as you think.

My hatred of Ruskin's landscapes, for instance,
is fairly sophisticated: although no women appear in them

I see poor Effie Gray in every sunset,

in every godforsaken river and ruin.

Sometimes the autobiography just creeps in.

I'm glad, after John rejected her,

that Effie was able to recover and marry again.

No, I've never tried cuttlefish or finished *The Stones of Venice*

but several years back I wept watching *Summertime*.

Maybe if I were older or from the Midwest,

like Katharine Hepburn's character—

adultery is always easier in the movies.

3

At the Apollo Diner some terms are too nebulous.

Some confessions are meant to be written

in permanent marker in a public restroom.

John is a popular name.

Last night I fell asleep with one hand
pressed against the wall for balance

and woke to a pain shooting through my arm.
If only I'd practiced more restraint at that bar—

In retrospect I should've put down my foot.
In retrospect you're an open book:

sooner or later you'll pour the same
Beam down some other girl's throat.

4

Yes, if she weren't grinning, she'd resemble Jesus:
sheet-white, contorted, less busty than usual.
Where does the light come from? The candelabrum holds
only dead wicks and stumps of wax.
Do you keep this place frigid on purpose
so her nipples stay erect?
A commissioned artist can afford utilities, especially one
already "risen" according to that important critic.
No windows, no books but Kerouac,
who doesn't count. Vintage pinups on the carpet.
And too much time spent wasted, wasting away.
When she closes her eyes, where does her mind go?
Fruit bowl, stain on the floor, fruit stain, somewhere far.

5

Something there is that doesn't love melodrama.

When you said you finally understood Botticelli
we were sitting close on the Dogana steps.

That was four years ago: I'd panicked,
then missed the train to Munich.

The things we want to forget we can't.

A long time I stood on the Bridge of Sighs,
waiting for the water to answer back.

If I'd had on more clothes, if my hair hadn't grown

so unruly, frayed from the constant sun,

I would've felt less foreign.

But all I'd planned to say anyway was congrats!—
the wife, the kid, the grant.

6

A whole planet, like the face of a goddess,
silhouetted against the sun
just under 20 minutes:

the duration of *Jeopardy!* without commercials,
coffee with mom, my commute home.
—But the precise moment of contact,

when Venus first touches the sun's edge,
is impossible to discern
and the separation's a blur

—what the folks at astrologyzone.com
have termed the "teardrop."
Who knows who touched who first?

So when I realized I missed it,
that rare cosmic event that could cure
every sexual hang-up,

I cried hard
on the subway, on the crosstown bus,
on a lonely park bench

overlooking the Hudson.
A grown woman behaving like a child.
I knew better than to harm myself,

I knew my loss was small
in the larger scheme of things,
in this city where every second

someone dies, another gives birth.
My head between my knees,
I couldn't take the onslaught

of spring, my part in it:
the trees' showy leaves,
the flowers slowly opening.

POEM WITH A BIRD IN IT

The boy next to you—not yet a boy,
a baby really—playing with his hands

so easily swallowed by his father's fist,
doesn't understand death or life,

doesn't envy the lovebird
safely caged a few stops away,

convinced that the image in the mirror
is something other, something better

than her own, every morning banging
her body harder against it, mouthing millet,

every day beginning the same, as Jarrell wanted,
with that same wish. According to the sky—

not a sliver of cloud, a blue pure and piercing—
everything's dandy. You want to cry,

you want to touch the cheek of a complete stranger,
but, when the bus halts, it's your own face in your hands.

You step onto the street unsettled as usual
by its name—Gallows—walk the half-mile

to the hospital entrance humming a song that will offer
little help to the man about to disappear

into his mattress, to the wife feeding him crushed ice,
delicately swabbing with oil the inside of his nose.

And when you ask how he's doing—"The same.
I'm dead or I'm dying. You know, the same."

1457 CHAPIN STREET

1

Three things you'll never tire of: a baby's scalp, the sound of water, fire. So says a friend also on this park bench. In her lap, an infant pacified. Your eyes shift to asphalt. Fault. The heart not responding, petering out. And when the face loses color, the nurse on-duty hides it with a pall and unplugs all the machinery. A gentle rain starts, slowing you down. You stand, walk: what you've come to expect from a Thursday. Mouths move to greet you, say dumb comforting things, dumb comforting things as if from behind plastic. Or you are. The moment before someone you love—the person whose nose you have—expired, he sat straight up on that metal cot and, in a thick north Georgia accent, said *Bye-Bye*. While they wheeled him away, past the diabetic on the other side of the divide, the grief counselor made plans for ultimate disposal. Every time you took a breath after that you wanted to apologize, to pull out your eyes.

2

Of all the characters you know, why quote Stephen Daedalus? What sticks with you more than that nonsense about the moocow is how he lost his virginity to a call girl. Even at your lowest, when you pawned a family heirloom and Annie's hair dryer, you've never considered prostituting yourself to make rent. You have, however, used sex to make you feel better. Whole. But when he's gripping you—his breath on your neck—you feel the same, the morning after nearly crawling under the kitchen table mid-cereal. Flat Coke. Flat Coke. There's nothing you can take to fill that blank.

3

Across a delicate alleyway—no, more fragile than that—two, sometimes three, feral cats wait to be fed. The emaciated one you call Huncke, his tag-along, Allen, and you can always identify Mnemosyne by her volatility, her pregnant belly. It's late spring: the only begonias still thriving you've imagined or remembered from a younger place, how somebody's mother hung them from the roof of her porch and, with a steel watering can, she stood on a chair at dawn. If you could afford it, you'd rent something overlooking the park, more resilient to the climate crisis, better plumbing, central air. More morning chores. Not this ringing in the head, this full-bodied ache that persists beyond the afternoon nap. Most days you feel like a pinecone, effortlessly kicked down the front stoop. Or torn, unable to open the paper, wanting to be hermetic and, at the same time, touched.

LOOKING AT A PHOTOGRAPH BY MANUEL ALVAREZ BRAVO

That is the sky, then, how you saw it
on a specific date and rendered it immutable.

Darkness doesn't descend suddenly at all.
Even on a clear night the most severe shifts

of cloud and color are hard to track, we don't
notice a huge change happening till it's over.

When exactly did the honey-colored band burst,
the pink mouth melt to nothing?

When you put your hand over his,
over the bright red light of his fingertip (pulse ox)

he asked, *Am I dead? Am I dead?* Maybe more than twice.
When you caught yourself laughing, you let his hand go.

DOLOR NOTEBOOK

1 Aubade

You climbed into bed fully clothed, or first, did you take off your coat?
What troubles you is waking to the lamp still lit, the bulb hot,

the book you've been meaning to start within reach though unopened.
You don't remember falling asleep, but as you busied yourself,

moving stacks of paper to a corner more manageable
you returned to that not-yet night near Barnegat, New Jersey,

the sun like a neglected fruit, a wound over the ocean.
Just a bathroom break on the coastal route to New York:

Nate bought Cheetos; you made another expected metaphor
out of it, the dissolution both messy and intricate, fast

and slow. Then more chatter you couldn't handle about endings,
about memory's inaccuracy, how looking back,

that specific shade of sky would seem less significant, less rare.
Under your breath, barely audible against the surf,

you got everything wrong: *Sunset. Unset. Unsettled.*

2 Pimlico

You try to block it out with small distractions:
at a horse track sitting Indian-style in the grass

while Roger Daltry gyrated, you were too aware of your age,
your ache, to do more than nurse a skunked beer.

For the first time in a long time
that feeling just under the diaphragm

hadn't come from sex, from the vulnerable
position of the sun or the cumulus rush.

A stranger took a picture of your breasts—
you glimpsed them in his viewfinder seconds later:

a voyeur to your own body, to how minimally,
how carelessly you'd dressed that morning.

No, you weren't infuriated or ashamed,
you felt no need to punch his face.

Yes, if he'd like, he could post it on the net.

3 "The Shape of Tans to Come"

A pineapple isosceles and a little brittle umbrella. Already you've had enough poolside piña coladas for someone your size.

Boca Chica—the only hotel with a vacancy when you pulled in at some crepuscular hour. Little Mouth. Your own feels big—

warm with rum—though you stay purposefully mute. A lot has changed since '68, the year of your companion's birth,

the height of Acapulco's heyday—your perception of it lifted from an old *Life* you found at a flea market:

two long-legged starlets in asymmetrical black, their blond hair bobbed, their bellies bare. Before we understood the danger of ultraviolet rays.

Before we developed ways to keep the almost dead—the should-be dead given the exhaustion of his heart—living.

4 Finale of Seem

Most likely you were beside yourself in The Healing Garden,
hidden among overgrown bamboo, when his vitals gave in,

his soul traveled elsewhere. The light was brilliant, blinding,
but your eyes were too irritated to notice. Despite the signage

forbidding it, you lit your last Camel only to let it burn
clear to the filter. The cardiac resident said it would happen

peacefully, without pain, but once they upped the morphine drops
time stopped. When his death was made permanent and

official on the clipboard, he'd been dying—writhing—
for two whole days. An hour beforehand, you'd whispered something

hopeful into his ear. At the top of his lungs (filled with fluid)
he'd yelled back, "Don't you think I know that?"

You felt him watching you through closed lids.

POSTCARD FROM MAZUNTE

Somehow Peter, Paul, and Mary are still singing.
Thousands of miles by car, not rail,
with a brand new timing belt, a tent, luck—
though we found worms in the orange juice.
Though for eight days straight
we've been unable to eat.
This is not a landscape I know:
loud, unidentifiable birds, the coast
giving rise to mountains, our palapa peppered
with hyacinth. Here, when he touches me,
I hear the Pacific crash, as precious as that is.
There's no disembodiment: I am my hips
moving, my chest caving inward;
that strange noise I make is mine.
The sky's the color of my psyche,
his eyes are green. When I see myself in them,
when the sun reaches a certain height—
No, I can't go home this a-way. This a-way.
This far away from grief.