

Abstract

Title of Thesis: Tour of the Ruin
 Steven Kleinman
 Master of Fine Arts, 2011

Thesis directed by: Michael Collier
 Department of English

The Poems in this collection trace natural and urban spaces as well as real and dream-like worlds. The poems are interested in loose form. Narrative is employed, especially in the prose poems, as a definition of experience. All the poems pull physical details from the natural world, from the speaker's family, and from several literary sources in an effort to quietly detail, on the whole an often flat tone.

Tour of the Ruin

poems by Steven Kleinman

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2011

Advisory Committee:

Professor Michael Collier, Chair
Professor Stanley Plumly
Associate Professor Joshua Weiner

© Copyright by
Steven Daniel Kleinman
2011

Table of Contents

I

The Violinist	2
Yellow Jackets	3
In The Garden	4
Tour of the Ruin	5
An Essay on Emily Dickinson	6
Little Cedar Boxes	7
Parish Bowling	8
CNC Machine	9
Maple	10
The Crabapple in Lorain	11
House of Hydrangea Bushes	12
Installation, 1995, Louisville Kentucky	13
Installation, 2004, Manhattan	14
Musician	15

II

Qualia Café	17
The Walk	18
Monkey River	19
The Parable of Exile	20
Shmuel	22
Warehouse	23
The Assassination of Vladimir Nabokov's Father	24
West	25
Three Old Men in Immigrant Neighborhoods	26
Visiting Sharon Ohio	27
Speak, Memory	28

Dancer	29
Traveling to Belize	30
Qualia Café II	31

III

Sparrow	33
Privilege of Living	34
Boys	35
Murre	36
Cleaning Dungeness	37
My Father's Shirt	38
At the Portrait Gallery, 2011, Washington, DC	39
Bird Calls	40
Returning Home	41
This Time a Year Ago	42
The Fields of Ohio	43
Conifer	44

I

The Violinist

Every now and again, the man on television
wincing at the explosions. If large enough, he lifted
his clipboard above his head, holding it expectantly
as the bombs stirred up dust behind him. The camera
swept away slowly to show the night.
A quiet city in the distance, then a streak of green
collided with one of its buildings, a semicircle grew
from the earth, swallowing everything. At eight,
I was a violinist on my way to great, maddening fame.
On sleepless nights, I would curl my fingers
over my palm and tap waltzes until dreams
carried me from myself. My brother and I shared
our parents converted attic. He slept in the middle
where the ceiling was high, and I in a small space
of my choosing, dark and solitary. I thought of it yesterday,
the smallness of that space. I was in Rittenhouse,
walking in and out of shops. I stopped
for a coffee, then watched through white curtains
a restaurant staff set up for dinner. I was enjoying
the pace of my slow day as I came to a stoop
on Spruce street that housed a violin store.
I could smell them from the street. I looked in
at their bodies, worn orange dangling in the window,
the lightly cracked edges of their f-holes, elegant scrolls,
the scent of sanded wood and lacquer.
I had given up the violin long ago, given up
tapping on my palm, on hearing the notes my fingers
would make. And then I realized where I was,
I had come to this same shop as a boy.
The daily noise of passing cabs, of business men
talking over lunch at the café, melted into a far off
buzz, settled into the quiet of childhood loneliness.
I fell to the marble stoop and waited to be carried off.

Yellow Jackets

After the plant expanded to twice its original size,
I found a room in the corner, away from the machinery,
an empty space that would stay that way.
It was covered in hundreds of yellow jackets,
the window sills, the burgundy carpeting,
the corners piled with their bodies.
It must have been the heat, I thought at ten,
the office pointed into the noon sun, magnified
through the glass windows and reflected
off the blacktop lot surrounding the building.
There was some grass too, across the road
a field of tall weeds where we'd let our dog run,
and at least once I ran with him, both of us
chasing after an orange monarch butterfly.

In The Garden

If my grandmother were alone on the wraparound of her New Jersey beach home, she'd be wearing a white shirt and sky-blue terrycloth coat, her white hair tucked behind her ears, large black frame sunglasses heavy on her nose, and facing the bay, she'd sit waiting for my grandfather. Once together they'd kept a great garden, never very organized, flowers bloomed wildly -- chrysanthemums, orange tulips over pink and white snapdragons, lilies and baby's breath. I spoke to her yesterday, she said she had spent hours this past week walking with him along the gardens edge now sand ridden and overgrown with weeds. She picked one of the four or five rosebushes that last summer still flowered, and stood there until he came. He wore his old dirty khakis, a checkered shirt tucked in around his thin waist (he was no more than eighty pounds the last time I saw him). She said he carried in his right hand his pruning scissors.

Tour of the Ruin

The toilet that once hung on the wall had been ripped away.
In fact the wall was not there either. Instead, a hole
made the gaping lens we used to see the city in ruin.
Led by our guide to the second floor of the building,
we stared out, amazed that the city was intact at all,
that the building was still strong enough to hold us.
From the ceiling, between us and the wall, torn sheetrock
and remnants of frayed wire hung dangerously low.
I imagined Tacitus, the great historian, kneeling
as he gazed out on a destroyed city, as he imagined
the crimes of Pilate. I reached to the floor and took a pinch
of silt between my index finger and thumb. The Polish poet
Aleksander Wat had remembered Tacitus on the roof
of Lubyanka after months of imprisonment and blankness.
He stood above the ruin of civilization. It was Christmas
and he thought of colors bleeding into one another.
A blur. Why had we stopped here, climbed to this room
where we could not distinguished the wires from the rainstorm?
I looked out at a church, visible through the hole,
seemingly anchored to the apartment building behind it.
I walked to where the wall fell away, wanting to see past
to the apartments. Who lived there now? The guide,
now standing behind me, described the building
as a slum-tenement of the former ghetto. He weighed each word
before speaking, their weight nothing against this gray.

An Essay on Emily Dickinson

Mom drove me to the art museum in the station wagon where, sitting backwards, I made faces at drivers in cars behind us. Our car was old, the headliner hung down onto my head—I lifted it when mom needed the mirror. The museum was always dark and warm and we would come in from a cold fall or winter day, our feet covered with bits of leaves or salt, and I would take off my jacket, fold it like a waiter's towel over my arm, its weight tugging me towards sleep. When I was in high school I wrote that reading Emily Dickinson was exhausting, like walking through a museum as a child. I wrote it the day my brother left for a semester of high school in Israel, and I got an A, at least partly because of my teacher's sympathy. Now, in a dumpling-house in Washington, DC, a woman walks up to me, and, instructing me how to mix the green ginger with the soy sauce, spoons globs of color onto my plate and swirls them into one another.

Little Cedar Boxes

My brother and I assembling cedar boxes,
three inches square with a metal sifting net.
I was 14 or 15, working at my father's plant.
Nordstrom's or Niemen Marcus were to use
the boxes in an advertising campaign.
Assembly list: four 2x3x1 cedar blocks, metal net.
Tools needed: air-powered nail or staple gun,
sharp metal-cutting pliers. Cedar is acidic
enough to cause a nose bleed, wet enough that
in a long planer the wood will stick.
If there is a knot at the end of the block
an air-powered nails will ricochet.
And if you hold near its top, the nail will
ricochet into your thumb. No matter what,
it will happen once, no one will laugh and
the older men will show the spot on their thumb
where the nail went through.
It shouldn't happen twice, and it didn't to me,
but later that year packing the boxes for shipping,
I caught the edge of my hand with the teeth
of a roll of packing tape, and five triangles still mark
where the skin had to heal.

Parish Bowling

In the league at Wynnewood lanes
down on Haverford avenue, teams
were named after Parishes. Our team,
St. Bernard was a Parish and a joke.
It was my brother's team, he
and his friends: a cop, someone
from high school who worked at the
art-supply store, and then me
when they needed an extra. We all
drank Guinness and Yuengling
while playing and then after
we'd go to PJ Henrys, play *Buck Hunter*.
One of the guys was from Pittsburgh
and he was a great shot, beat us all,
even Keith who was better than me
at most things. At the end of the night
we'd both get in our cars and race
through the winding dark roads
that ran the river and sometimes
the next day wonder how it was
we'd made it home, and other times
I know at least for me, I wished I hadn't.

CNC Machine

My father's shop was enormous. The main room was the length of a field, loud as a stadium on Sunday, filled with all sorts of dangerous buzz-saws and sanders, compressed air hoses we were told, had been told forever, would kill us if we pointed them into our skin, the air filling then exploding cell after cell, a rupture of some sort, inevitable. In the back of the building two huge garage doors kept open during work to quickly ventilate air used by smokers and gas forklifts moving long thin boards of pine and poplar, some cedar, oak and cherry from stack to station. On rainy days, the pounding tools matched the drumming on the tin roof, the whirring fans, constant alarms of machines beeping. In its own room: the CNC, monster among huge unimaginable tools of danger. Its computerized arms silently moving to drill and cut, bending wood and, to leave no sign of the work, heavy efficient vacuums to dispose of wood chips, flakes of paint, fingers that never would be found.

Maple

I sat on the red seats of the 104 bus,
behind the driver facing the windows
of the opposite side and listened
to the girl behind me loud on a cell phone.
Three women wore work uniforms, their names
stitched into blue breast pockets,
Susan, Manger, Custodian.
The bus moved in waves, and we with it
around a corner, a van cut in front of us,
and, as it did, I caught site of a small maple,
fully yellow in the wet cold of autumn.
Brilliant. I leaned into the aisle to watch
as long as I could, standing, turning
as the tree disappeared behind us.
That was two years ago, today I walked
past there, on my way home, the grass
weedy around the tree, wilted by cold.
How had I wasted twenty-six years
missing these trees? Where was it
I had looked instead? We are just days
now from honeysuckle season, their yellow
bodies will fill the air with sweet scent.
The dogwoods will bloom pink
and the cherry blossoms, white.

The Crabapple in Lorain

In Lorain County, Ohio, in 1977,
with rain threatening, they sit in a field
behind what was then a one-room school house
and is now a parking lot, the air thickening
and the ground warming beneath them.
Let's say they're younger than I am now
and that they're beneath a crabapple tree.
He's spreading cheese on a cracker, she's starting to say
she will go wherever in the world he wants to go
and although she has not fully made up her mind,
she says she will follow him—her hands resting
on her legs, her face practiced—if he will let her,
and, if he won't, she will leave without a word.
As she speaks she struggles to find breath.
Eventually, not knowing how he will answer,
she allows her voice to betray her. Now,
thirty-three years later, driving past the lot,
the man points to a tree surrounded by cement.
He says it is the crabapple they once sat under.
She says to her son that she used to teach school here.
The man reminds her of the time she left their son
in a parking lot by a hotel in Buffalo,
how she found him on his tiptoes
with his right hand guarding his eyes from the sun,
searching. He spent the rest of that day
clinging to her dress, tugging her gently
until she told him to stop.

House of Hydrangea Bushes
- After Wang Wei

Past the black basalt of the abandoned church yard,
across from the cemetery of moss covered stone,
buried away between Hawthorn and Maple streets,
I come alone through the waist high chain link fence

and silently turn to close the gate behind me.
In the garden, hydrangea bushes bloom violet, blue
and white. I have come to meet the spring, the bushes
line the fence and line the blue wood of the house,

the panels worn by ivy crawling in every pore.
In some places out of sunlight the younger hydrangea
still bud and in other places full flowers explode.
Please, let me bring you here next time you visit.

Installation, 1995, Louisville Kentucky

For my father

Outside, a few men just getting to work leaned against white box trucks for balance, tying their boots, pulling hard knee pads over their jeans. I was in our truck, a yellow Ryder, 19 feet long or so, drearily waiting for you, who had disappeared into the building some time ago. We would spend all day together, moving heavy dressers off the truck: I dusting and wiping metal clean with lacquer thinner, you directing and assembling. There were two men with us, a skilled carpenter, and another man who worked alongside me. You left in the middle of the day and I found you in a maze behind the store, smoking a cigarette, though you had said you had quit. Your face filled with worry and embarrassment, with vulnerability. When we were finished with our work we walked through the mall and found an embroiderer who made me a hat with a Ying-Yang symbol on the front, and when we got home—although I imagine you never knew—I threw it deep under the bed after my brother made fun of it, that small thing I thought tied us to one another. You do know that when you asked why I wasn't wearing it, and every time you mentioned it afterwards, I said it was lost, which, in a way, might have been true.

Installation, 2004, Manhattan

No, it wasn't summer. It was cold, and maybe a bit rainy. Dad and I were installing at Hugo Boss. The show space was on the West Side Highway, near the pier on the seventh or eleventh floor of a warehouse, down the hall from the offices of Homeland Security. Probably because of the industry, everyone other than us was a stick-thin beautiful model, long straight hair, angular faces, well dressed. Dad, the two men we worked with, and I had to move a huge cabinet, nine feet tall, about twenty feet long, and three feet deep. We had to move it ten feet. One of the other guys got a crowbar and sort of sprung one end of the cabinet onto a dolly, then the other onto another dolly. I went to do some prep work on a marble table as they moved the cabinet. I looked over my shoulder at its hugeness swaying back and forth as it slowly came into place. I moved out of the way just seconds before it fell from the dollies, swung forward like a giant mousetrap -- just missing me and shattering the marble table. Dad was fucking losing it, just about unable to form words, the guys didn't say much either, they just swept up the chunks of rock, chucked them in trash cans, and took them out to the dumpsters.

Musician

For Rabbi Scott

The musician walked along the river,
playing music as he went
through the late summer night.
When the rain began, he hugged
his instrument to his chest, protecting
it from the rain with his back.
Eventually, he came to a bridge
and took refuge, watching as the rain
made rings on the water. When it stopped,
the musician began his walk home,
climbing the embankment where footsteps
had worn away the grass. He stopped
again and braced himself against
the cracked bark of a moss-covered tree.
His fingers sunk into the bark and disappeared.
He looked up the side of the tree at the leaves
that, like the bark, appeared dark and thick
in the now faint light of dawn. The trunk
was bare of branches and still leafless
twenty or twenty-five feet into the air,
where pear shaped leaves exploded like fireworks.

II

Qualia Café

Across the street from the café, men work a hole
in the ground, two or three stories deep, steam-rolled
at the floor. I imagine workers digging and moving
for weeks to create such absence, but I don't know for sure.
Along the hole's wall of dirt, pylons stand every fifteen feet
as if fence posts and horizontal slats have been laid between
each make a barrier. I have trouble seeing the mixers
and bull-dozers, hidden from my view by a number of street signs.
The wires must attach to the gigantic yellow crane near the middle
of the floor, although I can't see the end of the crane's arm.
Behind the wires green fire-escapes connect the alley to houses.
Between the hole and me there is a fence, covered in fabric,
green and woven like the backs of beach chairs, an old man
holds the top of the fence and pulls his head over to watch the crane
lift a tub up and out of view. This old man, like all of us,
a child in a sand box mesmerized by toys. I watch him, then
the sky where a storm is building.

The Walk

The snow started early, and
by ten, as he ate breakfast with
his mother and his father, over a foot
accumulated on the sidewalks,
there was an inch alone on the thin
cherry blossom in the front yard
and ice-crystals on the corner of houses.
When they finished their meal,
he and his father walked the path
through the college on the edge of town.
They walked past ducks and children,
eventually into the wooded area,
stepping on the cold ground, he noticed,
intentionally quietly. By a bridge
over a frozen stream they stopped
to look at a giant oak, felled years ago,
maybe by a storm like this one.
He took a picture of the jigsaw-like
exposed roots, and after hearing
the slow shutter of his frozen camera,
he knew the picture would be too light,
he walked to the other side of the tree
without his father, holding onto the trunk
as he went. Straight to the top
nothing had been altered, the tree, frozen,
looked just as it had before the storm
and probably longer.

Monkey River

A small town at the mouth of the river,
and a restaurant owned by an old black woman,
run by the men, speaking Creole and English,
who brought tours on fishing boats to see
howler monkeys in the forest a mile from there.
The meat we ordered for lunch came from
animals in cages alongside the restaurant
or from others that ran wild, pecking at bits of food
beside trashcans. One of the adults with us
asked if the chickens we were to eat were free-range,
an odd question that went unanswered. Our guide
showed us the gibnut he caught hunting,
locked behind some houses. Near the cage,
a chicken hid from a skinny dog in a pile of roofing.
Back on the water, we pointed to iguanas and wildflowers,
banana trees that survived the blight. On shore,
around a turn, bushes burst with purple flowers
and, in front of them, on a half-submerged log,
a small green heron stood, one leg tucked
into the soft white feathers under its body,
its wings outstretched like in flight, drying in the sun.

The Parable of Exile

-“I have often noticed that after I had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it.” – Nabokov

I kept the bedroom dark almost all day and night by covering the large window with a set of deep, forest green velvet drapes. I loved how the light, through the slit between the drapes, divided the room into two asymmetrical halves. At one corner, on the northern wall, stood a large four poster bed with a silk canopy from the Far East, under which I comfortably slept away the nights of my childhood. Towards the middle of the southern wall, the door to the rest of the house was kept open day and night to invite in my mother, whose love she showed by showering me with gifts of Parisian scents, Indian muslin bed robes. The wood floor was a gift of my father, crafted by an Italian he met on business. Of rare quality—the dark walnut crossed with light maple and edged in dark oil-stained molding—the floor was among those things I missed most once in exile. By the western wall I would sit in a plush reading chair between bookcase and toy chest, each organized with exceptional care, filled with my most treasured possessions, objects of imagination. Rarely did I open the chest or disturb the thin dusting of silt resting on top of a book, preferring instead the wonder of stillness and order. Outside the room, the sun was brightest in the morning. By noon the thick tops of the linden trees blocked the sun and the room darkened. During these hours, on the edge of light, I watched peasants pass in uncovered wagons as they traveled to town, no doubt looking to sell a trinket or handmade table that might have worth. Past the road and another line of trees, a park opened

and filled on spring days with young,
beautiful women, fantastically dressed
in the brightest European fabrics,
escorted from garden to garden by
their male suitors, intently reading the Russian
and French label of each flower. At night, no doubt,
they returned to their father's homes,
speaking only Russian, and shortly
retired to their bedrooms, to solitude.
With them, I watched the last of the day
disappear from view, the pink of horizon
finally leaving my room a rich mahogany.

Shmuel

I name the trees oak or Japanese maple. I name the streets after the trees, the streets long and straight, off of which small driveways break like branches. The houses I name after bushes. This house Hydrangea, this Lilac. Some I name after colors, Beige, or Beige Stucco, Blue-with-White-Trim, Old Green. Though this is my home, it is not where I am from. Where I am from I am known as Shmuel, and in the streets, when I am on my way to the market to buy fish to smoke and salt, my neighbors call, ask me if I would like their company. There, each cobble is worn from footsteps, and there are not so many houses to need numbers. Once I saw it in a photograph. The houses were blue like robins eggs, speckled with dirt around their edges. Other houses, orange-purple, and the fences around their yards were white, worn and showing bits of wood. In the picture, it had just rained for a long time, two or three days, and large puddles formed in the town's center, the trees bent under the weight of swollen leaves. The old men coming out of their houses walked hunched over to the fountain where they greeted one another, grasping each other's wrists. They sat there and played chess as my grandfather used to. The children ran around them as fish do, screaming with laughter.

Warehouse

I am guessing I was 7, probably during the summer, early, or late in the spring because I remember the hills behind dad's warehouse were thick with leaved evergreens. And I remember running up and down the paths worn into the dirt by rainwater runoff from the lawns of the houses at the hill's top. Dad had a patent for a hinge needed to build a particular type of spiral staircase. That's mostly what they made in the warehouse, the staircases, then sold them to another company, run by my second aunt's husband's family. Something happened that matters more than anything else in the story, but I was never told what that was. The other company didn't want to pay; my father didn't want to surrender the work that had already been done. We, my mom, brother, sister and I, went with him in his new blue van after the police called to say there had been vandalism. We found his old red van, the van with holes in its bed, its grill broken into pieces of metal used to pry open the large white doors of the warehouse. They hadn't been successful in anything but destruction, although eventually the whole thing was settled. The thing about power, what I learned that summer was the hills couldn't soak enough to protect the ground from drought, the trees weren't beautiful enough to stop development a new development. It was built quickly, and filled with new home owners by fall.

The Assassination of Vladimir Nabokov's Father

Reading of the assassination in his memoir,
I imagine the family on the night they left Moscow.
They are all short men, thick and muscular, except
for Vladimir. He, like I, looked more like his mother,
tall and slender. Before they left the city, I think,
his uncle appeared, wearing a heavy pea coat,
his face red and serious as if he had been drinking,
his rimless glasses obscured by fog from his breath.
He climbed the steps to the father's study, his left hand
steadying himself along the wall, young Vladimir
behind him. They found his father reading
at his desk. He too, looked serious. When Vladimir
talks about his father, he slips, for the first time in
the memoir, into his imagination. He sees himself
somewhere dusty, but on the edge of a field filled
with butterflies. I think of his family on a
beach, one in Spain, where they vacationed
each year. He's lost something, a valuable shell
that he found the day before in a pool of shallow
water on a sandbar. He wants to find another,
and so swims out, the swells becoming deeper
and deeper until he turns and the high-houses shrink,
their roofs float like kites on the horizon.

West

The nice part of the city, I had always thought, started west of the college and stopped around 47th street. Driving past the tree-lined houses on Osage and Spruce refreshed me—their nice new cars and sidewalks clear of the city clutter made me think order was achievable in my own life. We lived west of there, between 47th and 48th on Cedar, catty-cornered from the Carrot Cake Man, two blocks from the Vietnamese market. It was cheap, 400 a month, and I lived with two college boys from out of town who worked as research assistants at the university. I had a room on the third floor with a small window. On the fire escape behind the house someone had built wood stairs to the roof. They were hammered into the slanting brown shingles, and all winter long, once everyone had gone to sleep, I'd climb them. After snow storms they'd be packed with ice, and eventually, after chipping at the ice with knives, one or two of the stairs fell off. Still each night I climbed up to look at the stars. The snow on the roof was packed too, layered with ice, so to move about required crawling, or sliding on my hands and knees like I might on a thin frozen lake. Once I slipped and started to slide toward the edge of the roof. Unable to stop myself, I stretched my arms and legs out to the edges. From above, I must have looked starfish like.

Three Old Men in Immigrant Neighborhoods

Uncle Herby held my head under water too.
He tossed my small body through the air
into the shallows of my other uncle's pool.
Herby was thick and short, strong, and always
grimacing like there was too much sun
in his eyes. His voice was all growl,
as if he smoked but he didn't.
He once told me he wanted to drown my grandfather
in the Atlantic. He was smiling, thinking of it.
He must have been in the service, they all were,
but none of them ever talked about it,
my grandfather, his brothers or Herby.
My grandfather was a bombardier, his brother
Mel stormed Normandy. Herb hated my grandfather
for being a jackass. Once my grandfather
hit my uncle with a shovel. Three old men
from immigrant neighborhoods. Herb's wife
died of cancer two years ago.
My grandfather, now 90, once said he couldn't
be a pilot because in simulations he always got lost.
He flew in fifty-some missions,
six hours out, fifteen minutes of bullets and
explosions, of death, then six hours back.

Fence Posts

As the men came off the rail-line looking for work at the plant, they'd check fence posts for marks others scratched showing who might have extra food or a place to sleep. In the thirties, in Sharon, my grandfather delivered mail from office to office in the plant. Leaving for the war where he served as a guardsmen, specifically as saxophonist in the band. There are pictures of him in dress whites, bent over blowing his horn. Pictures of my grandmother with her sister, their faces worked tightly into smiles, and one alone of my grandmother on her wedding day, the edges frayed and folded, her body turned to the right, dress twisted, and she looked like the angels my grandparents keep by the dining room table. We'd visit Sharon when we could, even though my grandparents moved outside of town some time ago when they put together a family and enough money to buy a bigger nicer house than was available in Sharon. In Sharon, we'd walk up the hill and into neighborhoods where I still have an uncle, and once grandpa pointed to a blue house with a gravel driveway and a beaten rusting minivan in the back lot, this house was where his father grew up. We couldn't knock on the door or walk around because of the hunting dog on the porch, it's mouth a bit frothy, and that's when Grandma said her piece about poor men in the thirties. The house was small and in need of work. I've been in a number like it since, four-room first-floor and identical second. They're usually dark, mostly because of the exposed walnut floors that swallow light. When they moved they didn't have enough money to furnish the new house, and with six children by then I wonder what each room looked like empty but for a few brown folding chairs.

Speak, Memory

Before arriving, the tutor Mr. Lenski painted seascapes on unwanted remnants of stones he stole or bartered for from the town's mason. "There was something irritating about his dry voice" writes Nabokov in his memoir, not to mention "his excessive neatness, the way he had of constantly wiping his glasses". Mr. Lenski's frugal nature was beyond reproach. He called Vladimir and Sergey snobbish, advised they take an apartment in a gloomy alley on a trip to Berlin instead of the Adlon Hotel—filled no doubt with every extravagance, white linens in the summer and silks in the winter, meals of exotic game for supper, bowls of fruit and cream for breakfast. It was no accident Mr. Lenski worked for the Nabokov's, Vladimir Dmitrievich, was outspoken against pogroms and unafraid to hire a Jew, a "muscovites" tutor. No doubt I feel the same need as Vladimir to "defend" Mr. Lenski, weak and pitiful Mr. Lenski, in Europe at the wrong time. He had no money, but a desire for things that might please his fiancé, a red plumed hat he spotted in a store, an expensive ceiling lamp from Alexandre's that Nabokov described at length as hideous. There was nothing wrong with his desires, his lack of humor, his way of dressing early and pacing as he waited for his pupils. When the Bolsheviks came in 1919 Mr. Lenski fled to France, returned to painting fantastic sunsets and scenes of vacationers on sea-shells, and once Vladimir dreamed he saw him in Paris long bearded and thin, dirty and weary, scratching onto a block of wood the violent end of day.

Dancer

She took my glasses
from my face and placed
one end of one of the ear pieces
in her mouth like she might the tip
of an earlobe, then smiled,
slipping them onto her face.
At first wearing a robe, red,
then letting that fall,
stood on a small stage,
said, *you fancy me*, and laughed
looking back to the mirror,
watching herself. She was tall,
her face long and thin. She wore
mascara around her eyes and likely
other makeup too, although it was dark,
and when she put on my glasses
with their weak, almost non-existent,
lenses on, she looked like a friend
I once had who had moved away.
I thought later that night of the dancer
as my friends and I left the club,
silently walking to our cars in the alley.
Then later, trying to sleep,
I thought of her again, and what
what it was she had seen in my face.

Traveling to Belize
for Walter Kleinman

Today, on the second of three flights, I sat next to two college students. A boy and a girl. The boy, thick and athletic, blocked my view of the girl on the aisle. They were both sleeping at first. Four days ago I was in the hospice room minutes before my grandfather died. He was gray in color and later that night he was yellow. Color and time. People and the weight of earth. The college boy wore baggy sweats, woke to brag to the girl about the drinking he had done that past week, drinking he would do on vacation in Belize. My hands smelled like formaldehyde from carrying the casket—heavier than I thought it would be. They must have spilled some getting his body in. The boy beside me filled most of his seat and some of mine. I wondered what he might look like naked. This is the sort of thing I wonder. My grandfather's hands, minutes before his death, came loose from under blankets and his wife, my grandmother, wove her fingers between his one last time. Those hands were amazing, the size of them, their fingernails twice the length of mine, long and thin and still strong, although more brittle. They are like his face was when he was younger.

Qualia Café II

Facing the yellow awning of Wendy's fast-food restaurant, I can only see a sliver of the hole. As I stare, a man walks into the café, pays for a drink in cash, leaves a good tip, and says something nice, *I like your coat, your smile*, to the cashier, before walking past the antique wood bar, and me, to sit on a stool by the window. For late November it's warm, sixty-five, seventy maybe, and the sun is more magnified inside these windows. Since I was last here, much has changed. For instance, the fence is now covered with graffiti, street signs, and directions the workers write: *300 feet, 200 feet, 150 feet*. One of the sections, stripped of its green netting, exposes a landing, almost too small to hold nine cement rings, each three feet in diameter and nine inches tall. A bus is parked on the street between the hole and the restaurant. Past that an SUV pulls behind another building. God must be a magician, I think, the way things can appear and then disappear.

III

Sparrow

On the porch, under the awning and out
of the rain a man sits on a low metal chair
with a dry round wood seat a foot off the ground.
Across the street a condominium opened
yesterday and a number of moving vans
are parked in the right lane of Georgia avenue
blocking traffic. Two women dressed in coats
and black slacks walk into the café and ask
if there is any plan to expand with so many
new customers moving in. A helicopter flies
low across the skyline. It isn't so unnatural is it?
I think as a bird lands on the wires holding together
the legs of the chair. A common sparrow. It's feathers --
tan, black, brown -- are like the bricks of the café.

Privilege of Living

I am in a café on Capitol Hill, a sort of sexless place
with a few tables, white or close to white walls
and bar stools overlooking old pastries
as I read Robert Hass's poem *Privilege of Being*,
where he says of a couple, "connected at the belly
in an unbelievably sweet / lubricious glue,
stare at each other / and the angels are desolate.
They hate it". A friend might comment, at a time
like this, that the women working the counter
taking money and pouring drinks are very attractive,
and they are, as are many women. But I find that I
look away from them, more often than not, out
into the cold and rainy night. A couple walks in
off the street. They share a soda and smile.
There is an inconvenience brought by a patron.
The angels like inconveniences. They must be busy
and enjoy a distraction. The poem goes on, I discovered
when teaching it to 19 and 20 year olds college students,
to describe the imperfection of love.
The woman wakes up sad having realized
that as much as she might love the man, he cannot
cure her loneliness. One of my students --
a tall handsome man, said it was about lust,
she just wants something else, he said. But that's not right.
The man knows as all men should, that he will fail
at something eventually. And the woman knows
that her loneliness is incurable by man.
And isn't that the greatest thing in the world,
that we're all moving at best, towards imperfection.

Boys

In the park I spot two toddlers with their father -- a stern-looking man standing erect under a large sycamore. Both boys wear matching boots up to their knees, blue rubber with small yellow sailboats detail, and they trip each other as they run about shouting in excitement. As if out from a pack, a sparrow darts in the direction of the father and the boys jump one after the other, connected by a lever, a seesaw, each one's hair a mop of small blond curls that twists in the air. They chase each other through the park, between trees -- in, out, and under metal benches -- eventually they begin to fray from one another, and one winds himself around the father's legs. The inevitability of light is made by the boys exhaustion and becomes apparent to the father. This is where the father takes the one on his shoulders and tugs the other by the arm, thus separating the two of them, unwittingly unbinding the knot.

Murre

I found a glossy book, *Birds of Eastern United States*,
and skimmed through, as if in thought on a sandy beach,
stopping here and there to read about the gulls
I'd seen over the summer, or the frigate bird
that just a week ago a fisherman called a gangster
as I stood on the dock waiting to purchase his catch
pointing at the giant bird's circling wings. Long ago,
I'd asked the captain of a small boat off the Oregon
coast for the name of a small black-billed bird
bobbing on the surface of the Atlantic. *Murre*, he'd said,
I think, or had he said puffin? I'd held the metal
frame of the boat cabin as waves rocked and splashed
over me, the boat, the other passengers, but the captain
in a perch above remained dry and spoke through
a bull horn. Coming to a cove the boat slowed
avoiding some rocks, then pulled close to the shore
so we could snap pictures of sea lions drying themselves
on the sandy beach. Brown bodies, orange shore,
the rocks reflected the sun, the wind whipped out to sea.

Cleaning Dungeness

The resort set 20-gallon pots near the dock,
the dungeness smell too strong to cook in our cabins.
The pots were filled with yellow brine that once
was water, once smelled just a little salty, like the sea.
We emptied the pots, and having placed our living crabs
in ice water, refilled them with the garden hose.
Irene picked up a crab, flipped it in her hands
to its back, then split it in two on the metal divider
between the sinks. She shakes the guts into a garbage
can, holding onto the legs, blue now, then tosses the meat
into a pile to be cooked all at once and holds up her
hands with a smile, green and yellow entrails
in her fingernails, bits of shell and blood sticking to her palms.

My Father's Shirt

Somewhere in France or Italy, a young girl has realized her beauty. Her long arms and legs swim through the arms of a dress borrowed from her mother as she watches herself in a full length mirror. She puts a necklace of pearls around her neck, careful not to catch her hair in the lock. Somewhere else, a man working in an office sky scraper walks to a window nineteen floors to a cement path, and standing with his feet a yard from the window, falls forward, for a moment feeling his death. It is a nice day today. It isn't the man's child, but another, that feeling finally old enough, ventures to that place she has been told is too dangerous, or maybe not been told, but still it is clear walking out of the house that what she'll find will change her. She has dressed hurriedly and might look a little foolish but also know that she thought long about how she wanted to look: her favorite white shirt, a necklace from her mother. She makes me think of my father, who, coaching a soccer team of mine, must have imagined himself prepared in a striped white and black uniform. I feel horror now at my embarrassment in him for something as simple as wearing the wrong clothes, though as an adult version of him I do know that sense of being out of place he must have known. That night I am sure he didn't return to our house, nor to a large office in a tall building in the city. There were no windows in his office, only stacks of papers, and if he ever felt embarrassed by me, he never let me know.

At the Portrait Gallery, 2011, Washington, DC

On the third floor of the museum,
first room after the stairs, dark except
for the painting: ameba-like shapes laid on
one another, florescent colored lights
that slowly -- on a timer -- lit the room red
or blue alternating, I sat in the corner
as far from the room's entrance
as I could, and having draped my olive coat
backwards over my chest, keeping my arms
tucked close to my body, I tried to blend
into the bench. I came here to feel something,
to end my long gray rainstorm,
and finding nothing, I left.
I ordered dumplings at the dumpling house,
coffee at the café and I stared at a wall
until I knew every crack in each brick,
and I let the coffee cool until
the porcelain cup stained brown.

Bird Calls

A jay calls from an evergreen tree over the park bench,
crocus flowers paint the wood-chip path, a magnolia
tree's branches are weighed down by buds -- premature
purple flowers wrapped tightly like a small tamales
in green leaves. Do flowers know? Do the houses that line
the park on every edge? Yesterday hundreds if not thousands
of bodies washed onto the shores of Japan after an earthquake
and then tsunami. Tsunami, a word English adopted because
out of want to describe something indescribable. Brown water
rushes up a hillside two miles inland and the people
there who take pictures and shoot videos from high ground.
What could be high enough for that? I've become obsessed
with the bodies. Did they come at high tide or low?
And where will they put them? The families of the bodies,
were they on the beach to greet them? A friend
reminded me there are so many things -- terrible things -- to know,
she wanted to scream, she said, I want to scream too
but the houses surrounding the park, they won't listen.
The people who live here have gone off to work,
The jay calls loudly to his mate, for a second I see the gray
of his head against the gray sky. His blue body still.

Returning Home

I grew up on Campbell Avenue, spelled,
I learned, like the soup. Across the
street Kristin lived in the blue house
with white trim and an impeccable lawn.
My friend Tommy loved Kristin, he told
her daily through elementary school, but
had to stop when she became too pretty
and popular. I've heard she's married now.
Once, Kristin and I were at the same party.
I had been on the back porch smoking a cigar
I was told would get me very high
but mostly just made me want to throw up.
After puffing away for a while I stood
and went into the house, down the stairs
to the basement bathroom. That's where
Kristin and I passed, and she told me
what she had just done with a boy
in the closet. The two of us leaned away
from each other into opposite walls.

This time last year
after Sappho

Were we not together this time a year ago,
and had we not just spent hours together
as the sun descended over the tree-tops
marveling at the flowers springing
up and out in the gardens along the pond,
the purple wild crocuses between yellow daffodils
like baby's-breath through a bouquet?
How badly I needed you, even the smallest of you.
Now, in my quiet moments I imagined running
the back of my hand against your thigh
just to feel the warmth of your leg. Come to me
tonight, won't you? Come to me and
we'll be together along the stones of the riverbank,
through the gardens filled with color,
wild, as I am with you.

The Fields of Ohio

I have a friend who in the driest months of summer
lies in his parched fields and pleads with the gods
to wet his fields. I once owned a blue station wagon.
I was in Ohio where the roads are named after soil
or orchard types and after ridges, where during
the ice-age the ocean receded bit by bit.
Sand Ridge Road, perfect for soy beans.
Apple Orchard Ridge Road, home to the greatest
apple cider ever tasted. I drove past North Ridge
on weekends, went to the mall, the great flea-market
on 194, or further north to *Miller's Dairy*
for ice-cream, I'd eat it under the metal awning
on sun-warmed red picnic tables. On a day like today,
where the clouds keep everyone indoors,
I am reminded that in Ohio clouds form over Erie
in September, steadily water the fields until June
or July, and no one complains or acts like weather
is something to avoid. Some days I drove in circles
watching as the fields changed green to blue, sheets
of rain falling over my wagon's windshield. I wanted
nothing then, nothing but to find somewhere to lay
alone and be parched.

Conifer

The conifer outside in the terrace garden caught my eye,
so I gathered my things, my jacket from the table,
my books and papers, and moved to the bench on the patio.
It was cold, but I wanted to look at the tree,
almost alone except for a few dying perennials.
I draped my coat over my legs for warmth
and pulled another sweater from my bag.
The sun would soon fall behind the line of skyscrapers,
but it hadn't yet. I took a cone, the length of my hand,
from the tree, and peeled back one of its rooms.
Inside was a small blood-red seed, puckered by cold.
The seed was hardly a surprise, they dotted the garden
and on the sidewalk they had been ground
beneath feet, but still, how great, to have this one.