

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: BEAUTIFUL, OR ONLY STRANGE

Jessica Brand Dunn, Master of Fine Arts, 2004

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Beginning with a poem that expresses a desire to return to a pre birth existence and continuing on through poems that explore the sometimes discrete, sometimes simultaneous experiences of joy, pain, and absurdity of life, this collection of poetry attempts to understand the world as a place that is at any moment both beautiful and terrifying, infinitely ordered and chaotic, boring and strange. In these poems I attempt to name paradoxes by intermixing scientific and emotional circumstances, love and disgust, despair and optimism, helplessness and power. Most of the poems are uncomplicated in language, syntax, and form in order to allow the mysteries of these subjects themselves to be the focus, and to offer an understandable framework for the incomprehensible.

BEAUTIFUL, OR ONLY STRANGE

By

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BEFORE I WAS BORN

Although I can't remember, it was
the color blue—the color of obvious
vastness or infinity: water and sky.

I've looked for it later, like in my
astronaut phase, my parents forcing
themselves to Florida and Cape

Canaveral, onto pre-cooled buses
that take tourists through the shuttle's
path to the launch pad, grindingly

slow, but not slower than the two
pressed inches of earth actually crossed
each hour by the ship itself. Speed

was the attraction, I said, or maybe
thrills, the quick crack of the seatbelt
on the antigravity tester we paid

ten bucks for, but I did not throw up
on, or even shut both eyes. Now
I'm realistic in my motives.

The mission I imagine is for science:
will a weightless spider find flight
enough to spin its web? Between

observations will be time to look.
From a spacesuit, inside the ship's
tight shell and double panes of glass,

I'll look out on the same comforts as before
I was born: no difference in plane between
atmosphere or ocean, the earth joyfully far.

FOR THE STUDENT WHO MISTOOK GREENSPAN FOR GINSBERG

In the same way that fresh kill
on the highway smells sweet,
she misnames the poet. Ginsberg,
now caught in dark pinstripes,
carrying figures not poems,
writes long and clumsy speeches
about time spent with Ayn Rand
talking capitalism while a russian
vodka sweat between them. It was
the communists. Had they not cut
Ayn's hair like her father's
in summer, had they straightened
her teeth, had they rationed a single
long and silver barrette, she may
have forgiven them the snow
around tall blocks of apartments,
or bridges with no beauty but
function, low trusses blending metal
with mud. As he tells it, his Treasury
job was a fallback, a "straight" job
after the philosophy went bad, or
after Ayn went bad with it.
The numbers seemed quiet after so many
high pitched conversations about trains
and minerals, whose backs were broken.
To hear him tell it, spreadsheets,
their lines and spaces, bend back
on themselves and move readers more
than beatnik rhythms the student
is still pretending to have read.

WHAT YOU AND I WILL MAKE

This morning, I woke up
and knew that we will have

an awful child. Not just
a child who needs dental work,

metal rubbing gums from all
angles, or a child who walks

flat-footed or, with writers as
parents, a child who spells

backwards or not at all,
using *x* or *p* to write his name,

even if it's James. A toothache
of a child, dark and relentless,

who will speak only in declarative
sentences— "I ate crayons. My

teeth are art. I'm an accountant."—
who will try us with phases

where he eats only blue foods,
or walks backwards, but only

when it rains. We will try
to love him, studying his face

in half-light hours, bending pages
in psychology books to remind

ourselves to read, starting each day with,
"we must live with what we made."

As he grows, we'll rewrite him,
forcing from our memories the day

he listed adverbs for hours, or snuck
a tape recorder behind our bed for days

before we found it. We'll tell him stories
that leave out us listening to played-back

silence, to coughs and sighs, a reminder
of soothing television before he came.

IN MEMORY OF MR. ROGER'S NEIGHBORHOOD

I never liked his show, it wasn't flashy but
slow, moving one slipper, one cardigan

at a time. Even the puppets were wrong,
wearing colors like slate blue,

talking with those plastic-surgery faces
and names like Lady Elaine Fairchild.

But I respected Fred—and he was always
Fred to us—because my father did.

It had to do with Pittsburgh, how as a child
my father took the bus on weekends

from Alison Park to downtown, where
somehow the steel mills reflected in the

Pittsburgh Plate Glass building
and looked dirty and clean, and it all fit,

but didn't. How one of those days
he was found kicking rocks behind

the TV studio, and he looked hungry,
maybe for lunch, so Fred just took him

for a sandwich, never asked what he was
doing there, alone, or where his coat was,

or what he was learning in school. He knew.
Or it may just be that Buhl Planetarium,

now gone, had already let my father down,
the stars never appearing where they were

supposed to be, even after he paid
the bus fare to get there, again and again.

LOST BOMB

As if they'd hired us, we look for it,
our points of reference real only

in the abstract: where the plane
might have passed, where the tides

would have been, where sand
samples have shown odd isotopes.

First, the government came to confirm
they'd lost it. Yes: it was the cold war,

and a plane was falling. Yes: there was
an H-bomb, and, rather than risk

detonation, the pilot put in the ocean.
Then came the looking. Many seemed

crazy, the kind who sleep in trees to
save them or live in shipwrecks, pouring

fortunes into finding gold. We have
our own kind. On days when it's raining,

we still go. We swim a methodical
path under dive flags, my mask

following your fins. Below us
is mud it's supposed to have sunk in.

Over us are blue herons, bluer
than is natural, a bird that cannot

possibly be, but is. They're an echo.
They're like scientists who wore

sunscreen at the bomb's first test—
so incredible, it must be true.

RECURRING DREAM

In it, my sister is a vampire, but sickly cute
with pigtails and a cartoon sweatshirt.
She is sallow, hissing softly in the kitchen,

breathing saline vapor through a plastic mask.
The nebulizer, humming, forces steam through her
asthmatic lungs. Our worried parents hover near

and prepare to drive the stake. I stop them,
risking blood to shield her, insisting
that I will not give her up for dead,

or leave for school when my sister, gray
and wilting, can't find air. She is tearing up,
crying in the vacuum of her chest,

saying that she would never hurt us,
that blood is separate from bodies, replaceable,
a necessity that we don't have to need.

But she needs air. The lining in her lungs
is thickening, her head seems weighted to one side,
her breathing comes in sips, and we all watch her

waiting for the next attack. I always wake up here,
remembering vaguely that she bared her teeth,
lost her breath, before I blinked.

EIGHT KINDS OF MY GRANDMOTHER

When she is one kind, she pulls a knife through rock candy
before it hardens, tasting for sourness.
In other words, she is imaginary.

As another, she wakes up thirsty and writes me a note
to remind me how sometimes a horse will sneeze
black, also to remind me I once wanted a pony.

As a third, she jokes about an Asian family
who adopted a white child. This joke is best
with my half-Korean boyfriend.

Number four fights loudly, taking care to point out
that if the Toyota hit a tree she'd be instantly killed, with
a vacuum in the hatchback for added weight and danger.

My father tells me of the fifth one who watched his arms
burn with kerosene meant for a poolside torch. She tells me
herself that his scars look like summer.

The sixth kind of my grandmother is quiet,
and moves slowly, mixing wine from
a box with heart pills. She also swears.

The seventh and eighth speak from the same mouth
that calls me on holidays. One locks my younger sister
in the bathroom. The other slides nickels under the door.

TWO POEMS

I.

A dead dog
collar caught
He's not beautiful,
but he's bleeding,
where he pulled
I stand and stare,
but liking it less
when your ugly hands
crossed your cheeks
blessing your body

is stuck dangling
in my cedar fencepost.
how a book would tell it,
and bare necked
collar against post.
seeing death
than the last time
that never moved
and touched your chin
instead of mine.

II.

In the room behind
we'd sit in antique
or mildly crippled
would have to push
where other girls
and passed perfect
while the best boys
We weren't bitter.
We believed the chairs

her mother's boutique
wheelchairs
wishing we were maimed
at least sick, so classmates
us past the Y
made great plays
bounce passes
brought them water.

WATER VALLEY, MISSISSIPPI

I was humid that August,
standing on the berm of the road
in red dirt, picking cotton bolls
out of the pile blown over from
fields, like secondhand snow, gray,
only drier, harder to justify
beside asphalt. I stood melting
and ugly, northern, thinking how
I had called the woman at the fast
food drive-thru ma'am out of adopted
southern politeness. In the sun,
the whole earth rasped, sick
for room between moisture and breath,
and I saw this place, low and soft,
never rounded like the Alleghenies, but
breathing in a different way—for life.
I saw that this road was only a suggestion
that kudzu could take or leave,
and remembered that even the local
watermelon came from Africa,
full of pulp, escaping from the harmattan,
dry winds that move the Sahara from
November to March, and it seemed possible,
a snowflake turned to cotton could
soak in moisture, be water again.

THE KIMCHEE MUSEUM

Some need or other would find me there,
the world of Kimchee, sometimes in the garden
where they grew ingredients
in all the variations—
pre-pickled cucumbers, the spices.
The restaurant—although I never ate,
I smelled it. Korean, not like yours,
but thick and frying, less vinegar,
less fishy air. More like your mother's dress
(I never got the proper name)
back from Seoul, her brother's wedding,
how it smelled delayed. Sometimes,
I'd sit in the museum itself.
One picture—a sickly looking
Soon Kee Chung, 1936 Olympic gold
raised, the caption crediting
the Kimchee miracle for strength,
his win. I wish I'd eaten too.
Instead of running, I'd eat to make
you stay. Or better, we'd stay
at the museum, ignoring Kimchee,
playing cards or reading, moving
underneath each other when the tourists left.
A man stopped me once—I think
because I was white and frequent—
and asked me if I knew Korean.
When I started the children's song you taught me,
he filled in what I hadn't learned, that it was
about a brave mountain rabbit, climbing.
I told him this song was one of two things I knew,
also *sa dong hey*, of course, I love you.

DIVISIONS

I tell you that every seven years our skeletons begin again.

For decades, the brain had no right or left lobes, only wrinkles.

You have a taste for natural ice, gray with dog dirt, amoeba.

Even we, our cells, divide.

We talk about old neighbors who named the squirrels—couldn't tell them from
people.

There are arguments over woodchucks and groundhogs, if they are different.

I tell you one of every three living things is a beetle, but I am not.

The two of us sit, often reading.

There are dust mites on our lips, and on the bananas.

There are two Cardinals that come to our feeder, both female, both brown.

There are piles of aquarium rocks in our yard where we throw them when our fish
die.

We can't tell the difference—our world, our porous bodies.

THE VIEWING

At the viewing, I'm watching you
instead. You fold visitation cards,
press your hands into relatives'
we joke about at family functions—
Joanna and her crooked teeth,
your Aunt Jean's spitty kids—
but you don't lose the way I need you to.
I've only seen this once before.
A friend was in the hospital,
a fractured neck, the type they call
a hangman's break, when the doctor
brought the halo, an odd device with posts
and screws. And they all smiled.
All the relatives and friends
smiled and made jokes about the thing,
gave acted winks, talked in party voices.
Later, as we waited down the hall
for them to put it on, we heard
the drill. We finally heard her scream.

A LACK OF ANTS

My resolve turns yellow
with this thought: If we had ants
we'd live in Congo with

thumb-sized bugs cresting over
would-be roads and people,
never leaving grass. The rivers

wouldn't help. All our boats
would bear holes, so no one
could travel over water.

At the top of the Washington Monument
I'm breathless, finding beauty
in not seeing what holds us up.

Ignoring girders, doctrines,
our lack of ants. They could come.
Or, rivers could shift, dry Iowa to arid

and force remains of corn to feed
whatever four-inch insects settle
in the flour bags of Congolese.

We could eat *fufu*, mashed roots,
beige substance that is better than locusts
because there are no wings

.
We are close. One more storm,
maybe one less, and we have dust,
or parasites, or men in charge

trading diamonds for soda.
Would we choose governments
like Congo, placing stones in buckets

with a cooking pot to name one candidate,
a metal spoon the other? Would we let
ant tides move us? Would we envy Africa?

OUR HONEYMOON, NOT IN HAWAII

We decide to be above it:
the magazine ads of “natives”
steering half-tipped canoes
against some wave or wind.

As if Hawaii were Venice where
there must be boats, they are
everywhere in these pictures, as if
they were more than an island’s nature.

We have a picture of Venice in March,
our pants wet upwards from the street,
my nose curled from the smell
of canal water meeting rain.

In the background, gondolas
look like bagged trash, black
rain covers crowding the docks
and the scenery behind us.

It was behind us. Not just scenery,
we thought, but everything
except the next town, maybe Rome,
the only place dirtier.

It was miserable day, so cold
that you stretched each finger, put
gloves on me, because it hurt
to move without your help.

As the flood rose, we shopped,
or took shelter in shops, feeling
ruined and frozen, our interest
in blown glass only going so far.

I whined that we’d missed Venice,
the people and non-canal smells,
knowing what the square’s pigeons
sounded like when they were fed.

But I’ll admit that what bothered me
were those boats, their signs
offering service in Italian, as they sat
useless or unneeded in the rain.

CHILDHOOD FEAR

I was afraid of it, before I can remember
why, I refused to cross the lawn,
the street, the open space between
a doorway and the car, if the slightest
yellow-gold or grayish moon shone.

I'd like to blame it now on instinct,
the way a wolf will test the air
and sense an enemy, or an
involuntary scream at a full eclipse.
Still today, doughnuts in hand, we
regress to lose the sun so fast.

But my phobia was less, I think,
the moon, and more another world. Not
cosmically of course, but something
minus nightlights, that said, don't look,
you don't want to know.

Something like a paper cut that's deep
and straight, seeming simple
but home to foreign cells that swim
and divide, invisible, yet living,
growing, as something always there.

Or something bigger, like empty barracks
on display in Germany, where sterile,
reconstructed, wooden bunks are terrible
not because of what they are, but because
they show us lives we find impossible to see.

WHERE WE NOW LIVE

Here, the steel is false.
Last night we went to sleep
and woke up soldiers.

We've watched buildings fall,
and it makes us want to
quit our jobs. Now,

birds peck litter and believe
its fruit. Farmers think
to water crops, but don't.

Parking lot attendants
wear blue, but won't
give tickets. Children

with messy hair, watch
the news and ask for combs.
Now we sleepwalk tired.

Doctors are prescribing
alcohol and fear. Dogs have
stopped barking in the alleys

because there is no point.
We watch the sky
and think of chromium, iron,

and nickel. We watch
each other. We ask ourselves
if cities can grow wiser.

OVERHEARD IN OXFORD, MS

My mother was a fish but walked on hind legs,
upright, and taught me love
of Rowan Oaks and dirt.

She whispered how the mud seeps with southernness,
that wet heat grows kudzu which
calls me to dinner with the
crunching
of the leaves against the house. It would eat the horse if you let
it.

She told me they once found a child sunk
at the bottom of a patch of snapping vines. By the look of her lips (half gone)
she'd been there for days.

Up north, Mother said, where the wind picks holes
in your boots the plants ain't mean—
they don't feed on coloreds'
thoughts or sins.

Up there, winter freezes stems and roots, browns
flesh and petals til nothing's left to hold
the wrong. Northern folks soak up the sin the kudzu
keeps from us and never see why you need to be in
church on Sunday.

DRIVING ACROSS PENNSYLVANIA WITH MY PARENTS

They're starting to smell. In the car
it's contained, though I've caught
it before and ignored it. It's too much
like decay—the scent of their skin
under shirts that cover less than before.
Because they are smaller? Are they less?
I can't imagine them old,
though they might be, pill bottles
adding up beside their bed that stinks too,
my mother's nightgown an unbearable
mix of sweat and hair, some fresh
stink. To wash them would be an awful
pleasure, maybe starting with just laundry,
whatever soap it takes to make things clean.
But, that couldn't end it. Their bodies need done,
and even if I faked a nurse's eye,
if I didn't see nakedness as love,
it would take days, maybe longer,
to execute each dip of the cloth into water,
each rub across my mother's abdomen,
across my father's lower back.

LETTER TO MY FUTURE DAUGHTER

If someone asked me why I love you,
I'd think first of drowning, though

you have saved me from my sinking.
In the years before you, I sped on back roads

trying to hit deer. Or trying to break down
in the rain, get soaked until my toes

would ice, so I could later write my pain,
describe my limp so well that men would cry

for the accident or frostbite that spoiled my walk.
I would trace your father's outline on the bed,

and pretend he had died, looking for a poem
in our last communication—his half-hearted pinch

of my breast before going to sleep. Sometimes,
I would sit hating birds, or trees, or the seasons

for seeming so manmade. And then you came.
Just like they said you would, you devoured milk

and my every moment. I fed you everything
I could find. I poured whole books of poems

down your throat at midnight, then again at three.
When you weren't eating, all we could do was sleep,

your limbs pulled in to me, your bones
burning my muscle with the weight

of what I had fed you. I would pray you awake,
my finally sated child, and ask you to take more.

JOHNSON SQUARE, LUNCHTIME

We don't come for the scenery. Stock characters—
men in suits, the fat bank-ladies,
even students sketching the fountain
know it's ugly, its sparse streams

barely pleasing enough for a strip mall.
We are surrounded by water.
Steps away, the Savannah River
mows through our town into swamplands.

The ocean isn't far. But we come here.
We watch carriages full of tourists unload,
take their pictures in front of the thing.
Most of us, I'd guess, have more important

things to do. A new husband (myself)
or baby, more minutes at the desk,
a last letter to a grandmother
(myself) who keeps dying everyday.

But we come, eat our lunches, listen to the man
with the saxophone, though he can't play
past the same first notes that repeat what we know:
we are here, we are nowhere else, we are nowhere.

THE READING

At the humorist's reading, the place
waiting for the punch line,
you are beautiful, or only strange.

When he gives it, you laugh
longer than I've heard, inexhaustible,
making me say *mother*

in an adolescent way.
The theater howls when
I look at you, as if they see it,

your absurdity and endurance. As if
you were here to prove the existence
of what was theoretical,

the mitochondrial Eve, definitive
mother who passed everything on.
You are the beginning,

but with every breath you lose bone,
so we keep you laughing,
keep you breathing out,

almost crying, like I found you
after school, in bed at home
when you lost your job.

You touched my hair then,
and it seemed a symbol: what would
go on, what was dead already.

TO DAN, THOUGH HE WON'T KNOW

Your concave chest, made thin by wiring
unmarked beyond the colors of the liquid
bleeding into you, is beautiful. For months
I have passed the elevator that I used to dread

to ride alone with you, reliving awkwardness,
our knowing that I only rode to spare us both
the sound of crutches on the stairs. I am still
embarrassed at myself, your friend,

who is imagining as machines become your organs,
each small button on your shirt slipped through
its hole, creating from each needle-scar a mark
I left to show what's mine. It wasn't when

you wrote the play describing the disease
that I fell in love, but when I saw a rat
submerged in water on TV. Or more precisely,
when I saw it sink, inhale, and somehow breathe

the liquid, its lungs learning how to separate oxygen
another way. Like you, using what could be death
to live, combining knock knock jokes in German
with monologues of nausea for your one man show,

listing your limp on resumes, growing
into sickness. You still look busy.
On your back, eyelids wrinkling in pain or sleep,
it's like you're everywhere at once.

You live where nerves are material for plays
when you could be merely sick. I make you touch my wrist,
my neck, my fingernails, though you don't feel it.
I wonder who I'd love if you were well.

FOR MY FATHER, WHO HATES HIS LIFE

I try to imagine you dead, at this moment
sorted into parts, each section wrapped
in separate cloth, and laid in the front yard,
as if I mean to grieve you publicly.
But in each scene you concede to life
too late, at the last minute reaching
to scratch your wrist or knee, and I am lost.
You will not go. Instead, you sing
each morning before you go to work
on stupid peoples' cars, and come home later
when it's more awful than you once believed.

I believed it too—that a body could
support a mind that weighs too much,
house something bigger than itself,
could subscribe to theories that insist
on differences between our fingers
and our thoughts. Beliefs don't matter now.
It's the way you work your job
and come home beaten, your shoulders slumped
from cramps or shame—the way you
won't stay dead. Yet, even in the mornings
when you sing, you're not alive.

AN EXPLANATION

To say that you touch me now where he did
is a lie, because he must have gotten further.

Even when I fought, he must have, because somehow
your hands are always his, always pushing in—
not like a cave diver, whose intrusion
must be loving, the diver always lost

to the land-level world, gone to everything
except his cave and what oxygen he carries.

Together, you both push like something else,

maybe waves, except the violence
isn't natural. My body isn't a beach—
it isn't either, either of your homes, although

this may be the best metaphor—that you come in
like the dripping of some ancient plumbing,

each separate drop dismissible, but together an omen:
the possible rotting of the basement or deeper,
the possible ruin of the house, or, more awful,
the tangible failing of its tenant to keep the water out.

TO BE SITTING STILL

How is it that moving seems so right
in the morning? It's the right thing
to be doing until lunchtime when

the sun starts to mirror us as we get
a little yawny, our sandwiches the most
unanimated things that we can fathom, and

maybe for this reason, we eat them anyway.
Even in the evening, I've never stopped
to look at birds. My mother describes them as

sometimes interesting, fighting or
looking blue and beautiful, but mostly
brown and tedious. I'd still like to see one.

I'd trade any movement for my own:
volunteer to swim the English Channel,
and on the other side say, "How will I get back?"

because I just want to sit. Instead, they'd make me
ride the stretcher, across the lawn to the ambulance,
which would be worse than swimming—

that feeling in my legs when they first
touch land, that they're still kicking,
that I've never left the water, or I never will.

AT THE AQUARIUM

Yesterday, at the aquarium,
I imagined myself watching
as I stepped off the bridge,
tipped into the Manta Ray pool,
felt the cool wet of jeans on knees.

I tried to walk, but it was hard,
tight water, and walking was too ridiculous
with the pool floor's slope,
the animals' fins sometimes at my clothes,
sometimes seeming like skin.

I was reminded of Sundays in church
as a child when I would look up
at the wooden beams and see myself
finding an easy balance over everyone.
I would be looking down at hair,

my toes hot with the work of steadiness.
I counted how these people got here,
in buses, cars, some by moving
their feet across sidewalks, and how
the moment had caught me years before

when I was walking into the school toilet,
reaching for the slide-lock that would shut me in
the stall with scratched-in names
of other students, and I wondered where
they were—how they could go on without me.

THE FIGHT

The hardest hit, so to speak,
was my father, who stood
between me and the door.

He faced me, plain expressioned,
as if waiting for a bus, shifting
back and forth between his feet.

He was waiting for me to
hit him, and—one arm in a cast—
I hit him, and hit him.

He wasn't my father, but a man
who knew things: where I'd been,
how the boyfriend had broken me.

He never moved, just stood
there, caught in the replay
of my ugliest self.

My ugly self. He still bears it.
Each time I see him, he is
that man I tried to kill.

He will die. I will have killed him.
There are not fists enough
to make him someone else.

THE DEAFNESS OF BIRDS

This is among the things I should've known,
but didn't—that there is no deafness of birds,

that they hear more precisely than people,
most animals. For them, a worm is thunder:

the parting of grass, the subterranean
chewing, or sucking, however worms

eat soil then spit it out. It seems obvious
now, how they cock their heads,

even without ears, to listen; how a bird
is song, and nature is rarely that futile.

More subtle, is how sound itself betrays them.
In the same way my grandmother

rescued fallen birds by feeding them eggs,
they change their nature—all of them

taking turns listening for food or predators,
then using their voices, like they are human.

THE RESCUE

And who could have been
more surprised than
the family, three miles
out to sea on a Sunday,
who looked overboard as they
cast their lines, to see
a month-old kitten dog-paddling?
Perhaps they felt a little
chosen, like the man who
loaned his barn to Mary
on Christmas Eve, who maybe
kneeled there later, maybe
touched the hay—not
anointed exactly, but nearby.
Maybe they were like us
when we found our stray
on the last day of our honeymoon,
doing seventy towards home.
We laid her on the dashboard
while driving, kept waking her
to see if she was alive, kept telling
ourselves we were saviors,
or we were saved.

THE NAMES

Instead of Ting-Ting or Voraporn,
my students, mostly from Taiwan,
Korea, some from China's mainland,

choose American names. There's
one called Stingray, as in, great fish
that isn't a fish. A perfect name

that isn't a name. But, Stingray
still makes sense. There's something
noble there, a fin that cuts through water,

or an idea of weightiness, an animal
that grows to fill its container, like
a goldfish gone awry. Beam is another

one. Because she's a woman, I think
sunbeam, not steel rod holding
something up. I may be wrong.

She may have meant strength, the shape
of a bridge against gravity, or of
building pushing sky. My favorite

though, is Pony. He is intentionally not
Horse. Instead, his name means beauty—
the same romantic muscularity,

sunlit mane, but smaller. All of the grace,
but still the choice of children—no—of girls.
He has come to America. He understands.

LETTER TO MADELIENE ALBRIGHT

Madam Secretary:

In Korea there's a saying about elephants: whether they're in love or war, the grass still suffers. As you'd expect, I'm going to say I've been the grass. When I called my East Asian Politics professor a communist, what I meant was he was rude. A poor comparison, I'm sure, and I know now when he heard it he thought first of his father, who I learned later was killed by Beijing communists because he was a teacher. And, he thought of hunger in all its forms, how he hid in rice fields surviving on raw grains, stole books enough to get into Stanford, even without high school. I had my reasons. As a woman and a diplomat, I thought you should know that he had insight on America, explaining how the reason women's suffrage came so late was due to stick-shift cars. We couldn't drive them to the polls.

THE COLLAPSE AT BICKLE'S FARM

You made an odd living then,
raising pheasants not far from
your parents' house, working
for an ex-girlfriend's dad.
It was winter, and the snow
wanted to be rain, lighter or less
lasting, and we said we agreed.
That Sunday, wedged in awful
snow, lifting shovels, and again
lifting shovels of weather,
we dug bird bodies as heavy
as lust, and as wet. My muscles
gave first and I caved, suddenly smelling
the iron of corn feed and pheasant waste,
some blood. Then, story of my
college friend, who, when racing
through Gallitzen State Park,
stuck a Ruffed Grouse
neck first, between his bumper
and hood, then drove faster,
just came. At this, you unbent
your back, and really looked at me.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

I first notice at the movies.
This one is set in the future,

and people have begun to take
robots as children. The scene

that gets me is embarrassing.
The lead character is six and

mechanical. He is abandoned,
and ends up at the equivalent of

a demolition derby. Each robot
is dragged into the stadium, some

tied up, some catapulted into
the stands, some are drawn and

quartered. There is a fantastic
display of hardware. Like the rarest

of roses, sparks in every color spray
from vein-like wiring that snakes

out from severed metal limbs.
The wires are red and blue on purpose,

as if they were leading to a working
heart, as if there was oxygen to carry.

And as if there was reason to push
further, the robots are screaming

in a way that's worse than human.
It's the familiar screech of metal on

metal, but with feeling, like noise
that splits out of a mother at her

infant's funeral. There are people
laughing in the theater, but I feel

like I'm treading water. I pray
as if I've lost my boat. Eventually,

I leave the darkness and go home,
but I am opened. The last scene:

a close-up of an android eye still
blinking, and then it loses power.

BAD POETRY

I didn't tell him it was bad,
but hinted that the *gleaming*
knife, and *dark ally* were clichéd
at least, and maybe the *sunken body*
of a woman was best used as
a metaphor for something else,
something more honest.

It can be hard sometimes, I said,
to be honest in our work, to expose
ourselves, weaknesses or failures,
but the best ones do and make
you love them, even when they write
how the trees were soft, the apples
just past ripe when an infant
was found in a neighbor's yard,
thrown from a car, and better their
lawn than mine. See, the drama
here is not the baby.

You have built-in richness, I said,
your advantage as an immigrant is
you see it fresh. Tell me one thing,
I said, that made you blink, that first
night off the plane, and feel like
you had landed somewhere else.
He said: a murder.

OUT OF WATER

No scene that I remember, but the déjà vu of dog walking, then, the signal of a half-growl cut short by my dog's jumping back. If it had been a toad, no story, but it was a frog, golden hued like a celebrity, which it was, appearing on the local news some nights before with the graphic "Wanted Dead." It was a Cuban tree frog, predator, chubby toed like a baby, and known for stealing pond fish, killing everything that would fit in its mouth. The punishment seemed humane enough, as the TV anchor told us to put in the freezer, let its amphibian blood sink slowly down to stillness, a quiet stopping of the heart. Too quiet, as if we had forgotten the snakehead, horror of a fish that chanced nature, acquired the ability to leave water, drag or pull, flop its way across land, breathe and walk. The response then was more credible: whole ponds poisoned, dynamite discussed, outrage over what it was, where it came from, all of us imagining a traffic jam of fish on our bedroom floors.

A STUDENT ARTIST'S OIL PASTEL

In it, there is an elf in primary colors,
reds and greens, some yellows.
He may be a dwarf, or just a man, but
he's wearing a dunce hat and is balancing
on a bird perch in the center of the piece,
just on edge enough to make you think
he doesn't care if gravity takes him,
a certain elfishness suggesting easy
flight, but his arms are heavy.
They are wings up to the elbows,
bright green, imperfectly blended
to skin, and tipped downward
like a child's imitation of wings
at that moment just before take-off,
pulled back in a reflex that implies
an eventual arc, arms raised and aligned
with the ears. Of course, as a drawing,
it stays this way, full of sinuous potential
that looks unfulfilled. Like a swimmer
who breaks the surface then ducks again,
his thrashing masked by water,
the whole drawing tries to hide itself,
is dragged down and down
by an artist who is too old already.

WHY RUN

Unless you are the chicken
with its head cut off.
Unless whole skies of birds
dive down at once, make
their nests together in the tree
outside your house, keep you up
at night chattering. Unless
without sleep everything
looks like truth: the first lost
baby tooth a collection of nerves
that never fire again, first death
of many. Unless with truth
comes a sort of gluttony, each
taste of tomatoes or love
and you are more alive, also
more dead. Unless your half-
life can be tricked into wholeness
temporarily, if you can crack
an egg, piece the shell back
together, and eat the egg anyway.
Why run, unless you are forcibly
upright, you have feet to do it,
and energy enough to get away.