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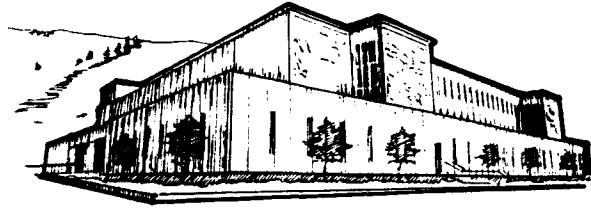
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University of
Montana

BLACK AND BLUE

By

Henry J. Gerfen Jr.

B.A. Dartmouth College, 1985

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

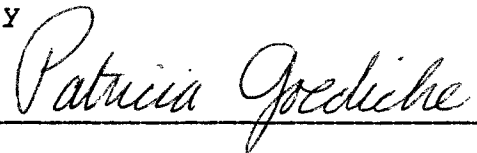
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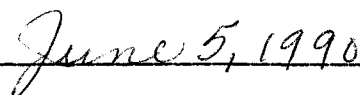
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BLACK AND BLUE

Poems by

Henry Gerfen

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CutBank: "Alzheimer's", "Communist"

High Tide (anthology): "Flamenco Singer", "Folegandros",
"The Reader", "A Sunday Afternoon"

New Voices (anthology): "Final Season"

The New York Quarterly: "Flasher"

Poetry Northwest: "Clay's Birthday"

In the moonlight
I met Berserk,
In the moonlight
On the bushy plain...
--Wallace Stevens

De pena en pena cruza sus islas el amor...
--Pablo Neruda

You hear pain singing in the nerves of things; it is not a song.
--Robert Hass

For Pilar

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I

STORY

A Night Out

Morristown, New Jersey and you are standing
in a Baskin-Robbins with two friends
when you feel the pellet snap
against your leg. You turn to see
a black kid sitting in one of the pink
plastic chairs, smiling at you,
a slingshot dangling from his hand.
It is night, August, and you
do not remember him from school.
As you turn back to order
your pistachio cone, you feel
the sting of another pellet.
Your friends are trying
to stare down the blouse
of the girl behind the counter,
digging into a bucket
of French Vanilla. You walk over
and ask what his problem is,
but he just walks out.

Outside you find yourselves surrounded
by ten of his friends. He steps
into the circle they make around you
on the sidewalk, and you can see
the whiteness of his sneakers
against the pavement, the crude
slingshot in his hand. Slowly,
he takes a rock from his pocket,
places it in the slingshot, pulls
the band back, and aims it
at your face. What do you want?
you ask him. Tell me what you got,
he says. You do not know what
to say. Your friends look at
their shoes. Well, he says,
what the fuck have you got?

You reach into your pocket
for the twenty-five cents
left over from the dollar
you had for ice cream
open your mouth and begin

to cry, and when he sees
the tears on your face, he turns
to his friends, smiles,
and lowers the slingshot.
You want to thank him,
but before you can, he slaps
the melting pistachio cone
out of your hand
and you watch it smear
against the sidewalk.
You little pussy, he says,
and flicks your quarter
into the street,
you ain't got shit.

At home you want to tell
your father what has happened.
You want to tell him
about how you stood there
holding the quarter out,
about how you felt
grateful, about how that was you
spreading out in a green puddle
on the sidewalk. But you cannot find
the words to make it make sense.
In your room you rip
a piece of paper from a yellow pad.
Nigger, you write. Nigger. Nigger.
And stab at the air with your fists.
Now, fifteen years later,
as you listen to the hundred cars
of a freight train
punching its way
through the darkness
of Montana, sitting at your desk,
writing this, you admit
that wasn't the issue.
You knew it even then.

A Sunday Afternoon

When the boy comes home, the belt's there
waiting like a member of the family.
And his old man smells, staggering, stinks
of bourbon. And the boy shuts up and takes it
again, because that's how it's always been
for almost sixteen years, for a whole life
of the mother sitting in the corner
and the father yelling or mumbling or too drunk
to go on anymore about what he says he's lost.

Afterwards he sits in his room. Maybe as a kid
it was almost enough to stand up on his bed
and pretend he was captain of a battleship
in the middle of the sea. But now he stares
out the window, at the dirty gray streets
where his friends wander around, shooting
the breeze. With his fingers, he turns his hand
into a gun and thinks about his old man
and smiles. Because it doesn't hurt
like it did, and it's a kind of pleasure

to see how the old man's only older, every day.
They both know the boy's too big to be beaten,
and maybe that's what really drives the father
crazy, drives him to bang on the boy's door,
belt in hand for more. But the boy
doesn't move: It's almost a joke. It's
almost funny how he watches the first flakes
of snow falling slowly in the afternoon light.
So what if they both know it's almost over.
So what, he thinks. So what. So what.

Talk

Something's wrong with the kid
who's always playing on the floor
in front of the elevator.
He never even says anything
to himself and he's got
a pinched face and drool
on his mouth and a body
that won't grow.
When he's not on the floor,
he's with the mother,
holding on to her leg,
and she's maybe twenty
and spends most of her time
staring out the window
at the branches of a sycamore
while she sits with the kid
and waits all night for the husband.
No one's seen any bruises
on the kid, but you can hear
how they slam doors
and the husband storms out
and comes back the next day.
The kid just sits in front of the elevator
with his mouth shut. It's like
he's a plant, like he's simple,
like, if you told him,
he'd walk right into a fire.

Fifteen

1975 and you sit in your room
with inflatable, plastic furniture,
acne and your homework.
You stare at an algebra problem
but can only think about how
the girl you have fallen in love with
tells you that she loves you
too much to be your girlfriend.
Even though you know her argument
is ridiculous, that she ignores you
because your face is covered with pimples
and no one invites you to parties,
you tell yourself her sentiments
are among the noblest you can imagine.

It is late spring.
You walk to the window,
breathe deeply, and stare
at the young leaves on the branches
of trees you will never know
the names of. Downstairs you can hear
your mother at the sink. Your father
is shouting at a baseball game
on TV. Almost against your will,
you walk to the closet
where you have hidden a stack
of old Playboy magazines.
But as you lie on your bed
and open to the centerfold,
the phone rings. Of course,

you know who it is
and realize you are paralyzed
from the waist down.
You feel the overwhelming need
to urinate. After four rings
you also realize that your parents
have no intention of answering.
You abandon the centerfold
and sprint down the stairs.
Hands shaking, you lift the receiver
only to hear the adenoidal voice
of your Aunt from Buffalo.
Chewing on a pretzel,

your father shrugs and tells you
he thought it was just
another one of your girlfriends.

Upstairs, you wonder who
the person is that your parents
think you are. You lock your door,
put on the sappiest record you own
and lie back down on your bed.
You hold the magazine above you.
With your other hand
you slowly unbuckle your cadillac belt.
And then you hear it, the sound
of the phone. How long, you wonder,
are you going to live like this?

New Bicycle

Kids play tackle football
while another boy rides
his slick new Schwinn
up and down the sidewalk
beside them. No one
in the game will look
at all the chrome,
the metallic green paint,
the purple tape
on the handlebars and the long
banana seat. Every time
the boy pops a wheelie,
they grind each other harder
into the dirt, struggle
to their feet, huddle quickly
and start again. The boy knows
this game. He knows no matter
how many times he patches out
or poses like a cowboy
on his horse in the end zone,
they'll make him want
to be inside that huddle,
watching the oldest boy
trace the hopeful lines
of pass patterns
on the center's t-shirt.
So when he gives in
and walks the bicycle
over to the side of the field,
the quarterback calls time out.
You wanna play? he says.
The boy stands there
with his mouth half-open
and stares down
at his shiny bicycle.
Carefully, he lays the bike
on the grass. Watch this,
says the quarterback
to the other boys. He cocks
his arm and rifles the football
straight at the boy's face.
You can't catch, he says,
you can't play.

*

Twenty years later as he sits
on a commuter train and stares
at flow charts, he can't recall
the names of any of those boys
but he can still remember
how he watched the tight spiral
of the football and could not
lift his arms in defense.
What is it that makes him remember?
Maybe the way the hot wind
blows against his face
through the window.
Maybe the way the train
pushes him back past yard
after back yard
where boys are still chanting
one Mississippi two Mississippi
and rushing the passer.
That was 1969. He was seven years old.
Vaguely, he knew big things
were happening. Like a war
dragging on in Asia.
Or two men leaving a flag
and their footprints
on the lifeless surface of the moon.

Family Portrait

Like a dumb joke the past keeps coming back,
always more dull and obvious. Like a knife
gets dull. Like this old snapshot. My old man
and me on a sidewalk in Des Plaines, Illinois.
He was peddling toilet paper to grocery stores,
and married to a woman he thought he loved.
The part of the picture where she stood
is cut away. You can see a piece of elbow

where she held his waist. Who tells you hurt isn't
an animal that grows and breeds? My father,
in front of a white fence, holding up the arms
of a son he would come to know on weekends--
as if in victory, as if he'd already
mastered the game at only twenty-three.

May
--for my grandmother

This time I am home
with an overnight bag
and you are kneeling
with your hands
in the earth again
on a day the color of ash.
With nothing to say
I am standing by the white gate
with the broken latch.
I am watching the oak
reclaim its leaves.
I am longing for the roses
that will bloom
when I am gone
and for the grosbeak
that will return
to the feeder.

With nothing to say
I am watching grandfather
in his wheelchair
at the bay window
with his eyes sutured shut
and a hole in his throat.
I am listening to the drum rolls
of thunder. I am listening
to the electric air
and the droning of planes
and I am giving myself up
to the black and white sky
and the first drops
that finally clatter
against the rooftops.

Alzheimer's

He'd like to say he didn't
slam the door and walk
the streets in anger,
that the dead leaves sounded
like something other
than dead leaves
scuttling over the asphalt,
that he stared
at the first snow
on the distant mountains
and pulled his collar
around his throat
and leaned into the wind
and forgot why
his fists were clenched.

But when he came home
she was still on the couch
with her knees pressed together
and her hands folded
in her lap. She turned
her eyes toward him,
and he hung his coat
and bent down
and began to collect
the stacks of photographs
he had thrown to the floor.
Again, he sat beside her
and tried to put back
pieces of her memory
one by one, but this time,
when she began to cry,
he took her small hands
in his own and knew
the idea had been impossible
and heard the sound
of the leaves scraping
against the porch
and a window shuddering
with the first breath
of winter, and he placed his lips
on her forehead and closed
his burning eyes.

Final Season

The kid from Texas is nineteen and a knuckleballer.
I watch him sigh, bow his head and dig his spikes
into the mound's soft red clay,
almost like it's a religion, this bulky kid
who already lives by the unpredictable.
It's the same old story I tell the coaches
when they ask--everything but control.
They're spread out scribbling in Spring's
endless notebooks, while the rookies hustle
everywhere and the veterans, like Kenny Lardner,
who must have been here fifteen years now,
lounges around the water cooler, spitting tobacco juice
for accuracy and distance on the dugout floor.
And this is home. The loaded bat racks,
the smell of pine tar and the way the stadium's shadow
darkens across the infield. This world
caged out by a catcher's mask and all the summers
of buckling and unbuckling shin guards, foul tips
to the fist, and pop-ups lost in the screen.
I wonder what it's all for though, the winter months
spent swinging a lead bat in my too silent basement,
the long runs against every year's essential challenge,
and so many sprints across the frozen outfield.
All gone now. Like the faces I came up with.
John Mendez with a lanky side-arm slider that cost him
an elbow. And Joey Robertson whose legs
gave up one hot September day that final season
of beating out bunts and stealing
what he couldn't hit for. Some rookie steps up.
He's a catcher bigger than I ever was, with thick arms
that remind me of trees. For a moment
I forget the sound of my knees popping;
I forget the load of each breath.
And I'm young again, crouched deep in the heart
of the diamond. I give the sign, hold out my glove
like a face, imploring strike, low and outside. But who
am I kidding? The kid swings the bat like a sledgehammer,
one of those beautiful shots we all watch fly away,
still rising toward the lazy palm trees in the parking lot,
long, long gone.

Story

For the first couple of hours
 the guy pretends she got lost
 on her way back from the store
 and tells their son
 not to worry and dresses him
 in his NFL pajamas and tucks
 him into bed the way he imagines
 his wife would. But since
 he hardly ever does this, he's surprised
 when the kid tells him he wants
 a story.

The man tries to remember
 if he used to ask for stories and realizes
 that he can't remember himself
 as a kid at all, except for a few
 moments that resemble those snapshots
 you pick up after who knows how many years
 and wish you'd written something on
 but figured you'd never forget.
 He scratches his head and searches his mind
 for a good story, but the only thing
 he can dig up is the story of a drunk
 who gets electrocuted while peeing
 onto the third rail from a New York City
 subway platform, the moral of which
 has something to do with watching out
 for where you piss.

That's no story,
 his son says, tell me another,
 but the man strokes the boy's fine
 black hair and then turns out the light.
 In the living room he turns on the TV
 and stares at his watch. He thinks about
 how his son wanted a story with a beginning,
 a middle and an end. How one part is
 supposed to lead to the next and how all
 the parts are supposed to comprise
 a meaningful whole. Until tonight
 he had convinced himself that his life
 was like that. Life as a house
 you build for yourself.

After a while,
 he walks outside, takes a deep breath
 and stares up at the bone white face

of the moon. Closing his eyes
he sees them speeding west
across Pennsylvania or south
toward Virginia. Her hand
rests on the other man's thigh.
He tries to imagine himself
unbuttoning his wife's blouse,
tries to recall the shape of her breasts
and the way her body curves at the hips.
She has been gone four hours,
and already he feels himself forgetting.

Clay's Birthday

The boy's birthday and the father is standing in line with his
basket
of fried chicken and supermarket cake and the boy is humming
something unintelligible
and spinning around in front of the frozen orange juice display
in his torn
blue parka a bubble of mucous inching down from his nose the man
feels
almost embarrassed he knows it's not his fault the boy's mother
his wife
is crazy and sits in her room all day with the door locked why
won't the boy
stop now just once just stop all that singing to himself it's
not like
he doesn't have a job to pay for a decent jacket that doesn't
come
from the Sisters of Mercy for Christ's sake Clay he says wipe
your nose
and pays for the groceries and in the street he yanks a hat down
over the boy's ears
and the boy dizzy drunk with the sound of his own voice spreads
his arms
knowing there are only five more minutes knowing he was born
in exactly
five minutes from now from here from here and now he sings
to a silver Toyota
to Dodges to Fords to the whole parking lot he sings this is
the last time
I will see you goodbye goodbye he sings this is the last time
I will ever be here.

II

THE POEM AS INVENTION

About Wind

The poem is not the wind, not
even the sound of the wind,
but the sound of one who stands
and standing hears the stark sound
of wind sounding in the trees.

The Poem as Invention

I

The poem sits in the saddle of Nothing.
Nothing is a great dark horse galloping.

II

The poem skates above a bottomless lake.
The ice is posited for the skater's sake.

III

Of the birds, let us say they fill the trees.
Let us say it is the dead of winter and they fill
the trees.

IV

If the sign is not the thing it signifies,
the poem is an organized series of lies.

The Face in the Window

The father sings lullabies to the girl
who says she's seen the devil's wife
in the window of her room. She can't sleep
alone in the dark, so the father
stays, holding her hand to make her fear
go away to the sweet land of dreams.

But for her there are no sweet dreams;
there are only the terrible faces the girl
has come to know as the faces of fear.
Oh, if there really were no wife,
as the steady voice of her father
quietly explains, then she would sleep.

What price would he himself pay to sleep,
wonders the man, while he sings and dreams
of his own bed and an end to being father.
There is so much he would tell his little girl.
He thinks of his own life, of his new wife,
of all he has learned about fear.

Fear of loneliness, fear of death, fear
for a small daughter who will not sleep.
He would tell her that the devil's wife
is only the start of a chain of broken dreams.
But instead he sings and sings, and the girl
lies awake despite the songs of a father.

Her stepmother wants a husband, not a father.
She lies alone in a bed of her own fears
while each long night, the little girl
demands that her father sing her to sleep.
She wonders how she could have dreamed
that she would be more than just a wife.

She hears the girl shout *make his wife
go away forever*, and the tired father
promising that it's all just a bad dream.
What a fool I've been to interfere,
she thinks bitterly and gives up on sleep.
While on and on he sings to the girl.

To hell with her dreams, thinks the wife.
The girl is drenched in her fear.
The father's song puts no one to sleep.

Breakdown

When she turned
and it was like his mouth
was not the mouth
of the man she knew,
and he was furious,
was accusing her
of stealing from his wallet
and screaming a name
at her that was not
her name, as if it was
her name, she could not
think of anything
but how the curtains
rose in the breeze
and then, please, tell me
this is not happening
to me, please,
and the only answer
was the shaking of branches
and the breeze.

Not Baseball but the Idea of Baseball

When summer came it was the summer.
It was waiting for summer in winter

and it was the coming of spring. It was
a word, and it was more than a word. It was

an idea. It was the idea of standing
in the sun, the idea of waiting for the chance

to run down a line drive or throw a man out
at the plate. It was the chance to stand

in glory and wait. And it was standing
all summer at the dusty plate.

It was a rite, a way of being.
It was a game and it was more than a game.

It was a signal. It was absurd.
It was as clear and true as a promise.

Folegandros
--for Pilar

He loved her and wanted to save her.
He wanted to save her from the chaos
of language, from the chaos of the words

which pointed and pointed toward
and never were the things he felt for her.
He wanted, just once, to build one image,

and put her there the way he loved her,
dressed in one lasting color
with the same wild flowers in her hand.

He wanted to place her on the sand
where years before, the wind woke them
at the edge of the tiny island harbor.

That was the image, he thought,
the Greek sun, the bleached village,
not built, but found, by chance.

I Sit Alone before the Dirty White Wall

I sit alone before the dirty white wall
of the apartment, trying not to forget
whatever it was that made us angry
enough to hate each other an hour before.
The broken glass is still on the stunned floor
where I threw it. Not ready to pick it all
back up yet, I stare at the line of a jet
running off into the wasted sky.

Nothing lasts. Call it love, call it fear,
soon we'll be back in each others' arms
for lack of anywhere else to turn.
But O how we love to let ourselves burn
and burn like those self-consuming stars
that look so cold and blue from here.

Of Fields and Burning Then

Walking home at dusk
we stopped at the edge of a field
and you pointed to the smoke
that rose from the charred earth.
The swollen hills were purple
in the distance and the shapes
of the stilled tractors
trembled in the diminishing light
and you let your arm fall
and dropped your head to your chest.

That was ten years ago.
I took you in my arms
and lied about how
the world was still before us.
As you turned away from it,
there was the sound of a dog barking,
the electric hunger of power lines in the night.

Flamenco Singer

Beyond the guitar, beyond the mad dance,
beyond the words themselves, his voice alone,
rose to give the old words new meaning.

It was a sadder sound; it was like no sound
he had known before, beyond the guitar,
beyond the mad dance. It was his voice alone.

It was primitive and pure as pain. And he
gave the sound sense and a certain beauty
in the hollow space between sound and sorrow.

Forget that he'd never done anything right.
Forget his petty faults and silly greed.
Forgive him everything. It was like no sound

he had made before, just for a moment,
just once, in a sudden burst of bare defiance
--beyond the guitar and the furious dance--
to be heard before he fell back into silence.

III

FAIRY TALE

Returning

A man finds himself
in Great Falls, Montana,
walking down a tunnel
towards a sister
he hasn't seen in fifteen years.
His mother is dead.
He has been repeating this to himself
all morning, thirty thousand feet
from the earth, but now,
as his sister grips the wheel
of a pick-up truck
and the man sees
the hot summer wind
blowing across wheat
on the eastern plain,
this seems impossible.
He is really home
for a visit
and can already see
the great moon of his mother's face
framed in the kitchen window.
He knows the house will smell
like meatloaf and boiled cabbage,
and the man can even hear
the hum of a fan and the tinny voice
of the evangelical radio
preaching to itself all day
in the empty living room.
And it's only the way
his sister won't look at him
when she slams the door
of the cab, turns her back
and stalks off to the front porch,
that stops him
from leaning out the window
to shout into the swirling dust:
I'm back. I'm home.
Hey. Listen. I'm really home.

Getting Away from It All

The woman stands in her husband's robe
on the balcony. Last night they'd been drunk,
but now it is morning and she stares
down at the old square as one might
into a cup of coffee. She follows the path
of a girl running to school. The church bell
is ringing and the girl's long, black hair
rises and falls with her short strides.
The woman thinks of a picture of herself
as a girl. Dressed in a red jacket
and yellow boots, she sits on a stone wall
near fallen leaves. Her father
chops wood and the silver
blade of his axe is falling.

It is twenty-five years since that picture
and the father is dead. She loses
sight of the girl, but from the rail
she can see the main street
leading out toward the brown countryside.
Vendors wheel their carts to market.
Two men stop on the corner
to smoke and talk. How simple their lives seem.
Children off to school and fruit in the market.
She imagines the neat rows of girls;
plums, purple and ripe in baskets.
She hears her husband inside at the sink.
Water running steadily. He calls
her name. Soon they must be leaving.
She turns from the street and then
she is crying. Think how they ask her
for nothing--the cafes long since open
and the workers heading off
to the fields by themselves.

The Sporting

For us this might be the center
of the universe. We come in
and Ursus is there behind the bar,
pouring another drink to Alberto
whose face is empty as a shadow.
He still limps from the Motoguzzi accident
he swore could never happen.
Two shots of brandy in every coffee
and eyes that look almost ready
to admit he's not even
half the man he set out to be.

Pictures of rugby players hang on the walls,
showing off the perfect technique,
the diving try we all see ourselves
making, despite each beer
and no training. In one, Terry Holmes
stiff-arms his way past a startled Frenchman
with a look that says *this is my whole life*
between the chalked lines where
the erratic path of a fat, white ball
lets us all forget for a time

our failures. Trucha's busted marriage.
Gorro's going on and on about one
lousy championship match lost years ago
in the mud in Seville, while Lole and Manuel
sing flamenco on cassette, a dirge
about sun and the cracked earth,
a sadness older than language.
These songs, Rizos says, these are our missiles.
Pats me hard on the back. And laughs.

Funeral on Skye

Walking to the square
in a light mist
and the diesel smell

of the harbor, we pass
the young widower
and his daughter

pulling away
toward the children
who press their faces

through the black bars
of the church fence
in silence. The air

is raw September
blowing in
from the Atlantic

and below, rough hands,
rough voices, the catch
unloaded on the pier.

We stop to watch
the rain falling now
on their coarse

wool suits, the beads
of water, how they
push themselves

into the swell
of wind
over and over

with eyes
that glance at us
saying *strangers*

strangers
before they turn
away.

Communist

The locals said after the war he spent
twenty-five years in Franco's jails,
embittered, half-insane, dying
of hunger and contemplating revenge.
All of which made him a hero to me, an object
of my unwavering fascination as I watched him
sit, day after day, in the half-shade
of the same flickering leaves, studying
the monotonous rows of twisted olive trees
on the brown, dust choked Andalusian hills.
When he finally spoke to me, one night,
he was drunk in the local bodega. Leaning forward
on a three-legged stool, he pushed his breath
into my face. His voice had the texture
of gravel. Do you know what I wanted,
what I really wanted? he asked
with the single-mindedness of a man
discharging a burden he had carried
too many times up the same hill.
I wanted a woman. I wanted
to get laid, he said and laughed.
What did I expect? A fist
in the air? A band playing the International?
The word *liberty* on his lips?

Therapy

In my mind's suburbs
whole families are visiting psychologists.
Big trees line the wide avenues
like soldiers
while a popular song
rides up and down
all day long
in a red convertible
under the trusty sun.
Some families tell the doctor
they miss having weather;
they miss fresh air
and the smell of dirt.
Others won't shut up
about the city
they traded away
for a carport and a lawn.
So they all tell themselves
this is the place
to bring up kids.
They tell themselves the third world
is full of people
who've got it worse.
They make friends anyway.
They marry; they divorce;
they get married again.
They join badminton clubs;
they play bridge.
Kiwanians plant flowers
at intersections.
So what is missing?
Just tell me
what is missing
they tell each other
over and over.
The answer is always on the tip
of my tongue.

Fairy Tale

A woman sits in a brown office,
typing, typing. At twenty
she came to the big city
because one morning,
as she was shoveling manure,
her fairy godmother showed up
in the shape of a skyscraper
and told her there was more to life
than tractors and dirt.
Without blinking she dropped the shovel,
bought three suitcases
and climbed on a pumpkin shaped bus.
No more giant pigs, she said
to her parents, no more blue
ribbon cows. From the window
she waved in the spirit of adventure.
Her curls seemed to float
on the wind. Now, however,
after five years of smog,
typing, and hot pastrami sandwiches,
she goes home every night
with awful breath
and trashy paperback novels.
She doesn't know the names
of her neighbors, and when the phone rings
it's always a wrong number.
No sign of that godmother
these days, she thinks;
maybe I'll get a cat,
maybe I'll buy a parakeet.

Till one day she finds herself
before the typewriter.
Clackety clack it says, writing
all by itself like a player
piano, there's more to life
than this. Forget it, she answers,
chewing on a sandwich and trying to sound
like she's been through this before.
Really, it insists,
furiously typing out the story
of her life. See the Great Ball.
See the glass slipper. Sure enough
she gets home that night,

and the pumpkin is waiting
at her door again. Does she
climb in? You bet she does.
No more dumb books for me,
she shouts, no more living
in Queens. Out comes
the naugahyde luggage. Off she sails
with her hair caught up
in the wind. Never mind
that it's December and snowing.
Never mind that she hasn't asked
where she's going. It's fate,
she cries. It's in the cards.
Soon, soon, I'll be happy.

W-L-U-V

Tonight there's 50,000
megawatts of pure power
blowing across the cornfields
of Iowa. Black sky. Blue
stars. One flat highway in this
sweet nation of one more chance
over and over. For me
it never ends. I want it
all; I want a fucking voice;
I want to say how much I
love these faces whose eyes won't
see me, these houses where I'll
never live, the fields of corn
or wheat and the rumbling of
big machines across the vast
golden earth. Listen to me.

Oh God Oh God tonight I
could drive forever and still
be lonely. It doesn't matter.
It doesn't matter. I've got the
little bitch's body stuck
in the trunk. And it's pitch black
and my radio blows out
its beautiful messages
from coast to coast and on out
to sea, towards Japan, towards
the waiting ears of Europe.

Managers: The Wife

No sooner has she hung the **For Rent** sign on the two rusty nails
in the brick wall
of the old building than she hears him again, knocking, drumming,
pounding his fist
on her door, out of breath from the trip across the street and
the three flights
of stairs, sweating, stinking from no shower in God knows how
long
she thinks and cracks the door open and stares out from behind
the chain to where
he's holding out his checkbook, shaking it at her and humming
an old Beatles song
like a maniac, humming a song that always gave her the creeps
anyway, as if he knew, God,
she thinks, why is it always when she's alone, and he's shaking
the checkbook at her,
pushing it through the door, he's saying I got money, I got
money, and she sees
how it's not the checkbook, it's him, his whole body, Jesus,
he's shaking all over.

Managers: The Husband

He comes home from class with a bag full of books and she's
already telling him
about how he's been back, the one with the checkbook, how he must
wait in the bushes
across the street, watching her, how she's seen him following her
to the grocery store,
how she just *knows* it's not normal, how it makes her skin crawl,
the way he looks
at her, and finally the husband starts in on a speech about the
evils of discrimination
against the mentally ill, and he's right in the middle when the
pounding starts on the door,
and this time the guy's brought his social worker, and he wants
to see the apartment,
and the social worker is staring straight at the husband, go
ahead, he's saying, *now tell him no*,
and the husband says he's sorry, says they've just rented it and
the sign, well, he forgot
to take it down, really, he says, sorry, and the taste of his own
voice makes him almost sick.

Flasher
--for Jocelyn

When the woman emerges from the black mouth of the subway the man at the top of the stairs rips open his trenchcoat and thrusts his hips and penis in her direction. She had been arguing all day against using a man dressed as a giant tomato for a new ketchup commercial and now only wanted to sit in front of the TV with a salad and a glass of white wine. Was that too much to ask, she wonders, as the man groans here baby here baby, its all yours, ecstatically erasing her thoughts of a quiet, uneventful evening. From disgust, she moves quickly to anger and regret. She tells herself that if she had only been patient and not pushed her way into the already overcrowded subway she would have arrived ten minutes later and followed the small path she had planned for herself. She damns her impatience, then damns herself for damning her impatience as if that were the cause of his intrusion on the course of her life.

The man, confused by her apparent interest, by the way she remains motionless, staring blankly ahead in his direction, begins to step closer, so close that she can almost touch him. Yes, he says almost tenderly, we could run away to Mexico, make a new start. He fondles his penis. The woman turns to see if others have noticed her predicament. New Yorkers cross the streets, ride the sidewalks. Pinstripe suits. Jogging suits. She realizes she is alone in the universe. You son of a bitch she cries at the flasher, reaching for the mace she carries in her bag. The man takes a step back. Wait he says, extending his hands as if to stop an oncoming train. Wait.

But for the woman he's no longer a flasher. He's a giant naked tomato which she begins to chase across Brooklyn. Mexico, Mexico, he shouts. Is that a tinge of sorrow in his voice? The tomato hurdles a fire hydrant, crashes into a fruit stand. The woman breaks a heel, kicks her shoes off. Stop him, she shouts, stop that man. People join the chase. A fat man who looks like a cauliflower. A giant broccoli. A cop with a face like a strawberry. So many angry fruits and vegetables. After nine blocks the tomato disappears into the next subway stop, hops the turnstile, and catches a train for Manhattan. Damn, says the cauliflower.

Shit, says the strawberry-faced cop. Lady,
if we'd a nailed him, I'd a let you have first crack.
The woman thanks him though she is not quite sure why.
Her stockings are torn. Her feet are bleeding. Her heart
is still pounding with the excitement of the hunt.

Janet and Harry

Last time you heard from them, three years ago,
they'd moved to Topeka
where Harry'd taken a job as sales manager
for a cosmetics company
and now out of the blue they were passing through town
and you'd said yes,
for God's sake, yes, you'd all make a real
night of it.
You remember when they moved in across the hall
all fanfare and tickertape
and made a scene out of Harry hauling Janet
over the threshold,
and then the constant cooing and goggling
and always
holding hands and calling each other
a hundred different
embarrassing little nick names in public.
And now, the way
Harry signals the waiter with a snap
of his fingers
and turns back to a one-man discussion of lipstick
while you open
and close your fist around a paper napkin.
"Honey," Janet says,
"let's not talk about us." "For Christ's sake,"
he says,
"can't you see I'm trying to make a point?"
"Waiter," Harry says
to a bored Mexican with his hands
in his pockets,
"bring us more wine," pointing to his glass,
"more of this, *comprende?*"

No Plato

His face half-twisted from a stroke, every morning he walks up
the hill
from the Projects, leaning on his cane, pauses, searches his
pockets for enough change
to buy cigarettes. Otherwise, you can see him picking up butts
from the sidewalk
or patchy grass. And though he shipped off to the War and once
came home on the train
to a wife; though in 1953 he bought a house and a new Buick, you
won't see him marching along
with the men his age in veterans parades. He sits on his green
bench in the park,
nodding and smiling as if he's just won an argument, while the
rest play dominoes
and brag. The retired carpenter who's still selling and
reselling his bungalow
on Cape Cod for twenty thousand more than it was worth. Or the
pitiful butcher
who can't get over the purple heart he got for shooting himself
in the finger
with an M-1 almost fifty years ago. He sits watching them,
shrugs
at their foolishness. He's no Plato but he knows what he knows.
There's always
a green bench, soup if he wants, at the mission, and cigarettes
on the ground.

Small Cruelties

Only after she's gotten him up carefully, lifted the almost weightless body, the calcified elbows, knees, the dangling legs, into the wheelchair and taken him through each step, sitting him on the toilet, folding the toilet paper three times, cleaning him, cleaning his teeth, the two different kinds of mouth washes, washing his face, the tube in his throat, changing the patch on his eye and running the hot washcloth across his beard, and only after the kiss on the forehead, after breakfast, after the two butter-eggs and cutting his toast into little pieces, the hot tea, Vivaldi on the radio, does he tell her to get the insurance papers from the file cabinet, adding the *please*, adding the *dear*, so that when they get to Larchmont he and Luke can spend the whole evening taking care of the business he is convinced she is too simple to manage.

And when she refuses, when she tells him not today, not her birthday, the silence, the wounded look, the ever-present reminder of the indignity of being a body that is not a body, which becomes his weapon, her punishment. And then the refusal to speak as she loads him into the van and they drive off toward Westchester, and the refusal to answer when she can't remember whether it was north or south, when she slows to thirty miles an hour, telling him she knows he knows the exit, until they're past it, so that when they arrive an hour late for the roast lamb dinner, he's still not speaking to her, and even before the son can say happy birthday to his mother, he can tell them, as they open his door, the frozen sun in the trees, "we would have been here," and this part, triumphantly, one more reminder of her failures, "but *Mother* got lost."

The Reader

Except for the lovers,
it might be like any other night,
but it isn't, because the two women
in the back are acting
like they've been reunited
after years, you'd think, after a tour
of duty, what with the way they kiss
and run their hands through each
others' hair. The bigger one, with the short
auburn hair and large breasts, holds the other
on her lap, and the music is so loud,
we all have to shout at each other
in bursts, till we give up
and stare at the ice cubes
melting in the long tubes
of our glasses. Of course we really want
to stare at the two women, which
is why we turn away, too ashamed
to admit that we're drawn in,
half-aroused by their hunger.
So instead we settle
for the next best thing,
for grinning at each other,
for raising our eyebrows,
for nodding and winking in the general
direction of the lovers.

And this would be the story
of the whole night--till either we
got bored or they got bored or
till the bar closed down and sent
everyone home; who knows which--
if it weren't for the little gypsy kid
who comes in selling carnations.
He can't be much older than nine or ten
and no one pays any attention to him.
No one pays any attention to the dirt
all over his face, to the shoes
he doesn't have on his feet. No one,
as he struts from table to table
tugging at shirt sleeves and holding
out his half-dead, dried-out flowers.
When he comes to the women he stops
and just stands there watching until all

of us in the bar, except the women themselves,
start watching the boy watching them.
Finally, a smile spreads across his face.
Perfect voyeur, outside of our world,
he walks among us like a little god,
stamps his right foot on the floor
over and over and starts to laugh.