

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

2015

The Sun House

Max Kaisler

University of Montana - Missoula

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Kaisler, Max, "The Sun House" (2015). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 4505.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/4505>

This Professional Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

THE SUN HOUSE

By

MAX KAISLER

Bachelor of Arts, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, 2011

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing, Poetry

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2015

Approved by:

Sandy Ross, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Joanna Klink, Chair
English

Prageeta Sharma, Second Reader
Department

Andrew Smith, Third Reader
Media Arts

I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy store. I remember what a kindly wink the knobs of our big, old bureau used to have, and there was one chair that always seemed like a strong friend.

—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wall-paper”

ONE BEAUTIFUL TREE

THE SUN HOUSE

One beautiful tree of heaven was enough to make something you could live in.
—Eleanor Raymond

Building things is simple.
The earth is quite willing to direct
with frank gestures, a shrug of grass,
a nodding bough.

I have often wondered
why houses were not made like ships
for sailing between trees.
 What a passage we might make then:
 my sister's house
 headed due southeast
 cresting Beacon Hill.

A funny story?
Well, I have always preferred rain.

In Germany I saw a tree from China
growing in the park. I had a notion
to curl in its branches like a worm
and spin silk for the rest of my days.
It was a moment of selfishness.

That, I will not say,
but I am no misanthrope.
If I am in love,
I will say
this is yours, and it is.

FABULAE

The comfort of a green place: hedge, pond, pagoda, orangerie.

A spray of white blossoms sinking in a pool.

In my vacancy how the halves of me hang open like an empty trap.

Visions visit me then—helpful and attentive, squeezing my hand.

They list the benefits of lying in the shade of certain trees (alder, beech)

then disappear like doctors down a hallway.

The bed's acreage burns, wakes with a whistle of steam.

The wild or grandiose soul shakes its hair and reclines

exultant as a stonework lion.

Nothing else occurs. Solemn as a child I begin to fear the catastrophe.

Cold tuber pressing the rose in its fist. Ache of an expanding thirst,

heart sawing like a chickadee.

I begin to crave that garden I have never seen

its wide lawns & broken marble flashing in the grass.

NECESSITIES

The oubliette of childhood—

A vaulted room where the shadow of a wind chime made listless orbits on the wall. My conscience watered and tilled with small injuries, absurd infractions. Bed sheets inexplicably stripped, dyed, and returned. I devoured the wallpaper for lack of a playmate, shuddering at fresh aspects of the furniture, rank with suggestion.

Much sand—

The clutching, slippery quality of fathers. For instance: him there, the octopus in the water, scooting under a rock. Such a downtrodden fellow, dragging his coattails with beggarly scrapes. He has drunk too much saltwater. At home in the drawer of my father's desk I found hills of sand. Nothing buried beneath.

Some marriages—

There were several weddings. Why should there be more? One in May. One in a gondola on a soundstage. One in a gloomy wainscoted room. With a small pencil I drew pictures on the backs of pews and bank slips. My father's final wife favored wigs of dramatic length and luster. She took turns wearing each on the occasion.

Highly anticipated news—

Many years later I received my father's executor in my study. Tight-lipped as a hard-backed book. He labored the mantel with his elbow and spoke with bewildering distraction. My father already dead in my imagination a thousand times. I lingered at the study's door when my visitor withdrew. I did not trust my chair's purposes, slung open like a fleshy jaw.

TWO CONVERSATIONS IN WHICH I SAY NOTHING

The necessity to be there made less and less sense.
I seemed to slough details of my life as I walked
under the graying branches of Commonwealth Ave
until I arrived at our small rooms, empty-headed
and full of fear as I slotted groceries into the fridge.
Our desire to be made happy oppressed us like a heavy sleep.
We took photographs of everything and were out of gin
until Matt roused himself from the couch to fetch more.
I followed him once, watching how he walked almost
aimlessly, like a tired old man who finds it difficult
to lift his heels. I wanted to walk beside him but I had
nothing to talk about, which was a continual problem then
so I turned around and walked home. That summer the electricity
went out for a week and I sat on the curb smoking & watching
the construction crew dig up the street. The power
was down there somewhere but not even very deep.
It took a matter of days. On the last day before the lights
blinked on, one of the workers came over to me in my sweater
(I was very thin then) and asked if I would give up smoking
as a personal favor to him. I smiled and went inside
and didn't leave the building for two days, remembering
then forgetting how in school I used to stand in a bathroom stall
at odd hours brushing my hair. It has always upset me
how often pain is mistaken for particularity.

VENTRILOQUY

Of its own will my throat opens like an eyelid
above my collar and says all sorts of things. I'd let

you see but you'd have to give something
you haven't given anyone yet. It'll answer anything

you ask truthfully, except what I really mean.
Yes, parlor tricks are not beautiful. I've seen

the girl lying on the grass. She is preferable,
could be anyone, can open her fond, affable eyes,

throw the light of them like alms to beggars
(sound of bells ringing) in the street. Isn't this better

though? Beside you on the grass I lie inert,
bandage on my face. You don't turn toward me.

My throat blushes, recounts thrilling stories,
as gravity drives rain into the dirt.

TABLEAU VIVANT

Child. The constant object was to go unseen, without detection.
In my mother's flat I crept from room to room,
grieved by the heaviness of feet.

Orange piano. Out of doors you sat on the curb like a vacant house awaiting a match.

Child. I felt a twinge of kinship with baubles strung
in shop windows, mailboxes, weathervanes.

Snail. You admired their fortitude. Saluted them with private titles of distinction.

Child. Remote with chilly Siberian luster, concealed
in Tuesday drivel. I scuttled between hiding-
places, rain coursing down my snout.

Telephone with cord. Over bolts of cambric many yards wide, under garage doors.

Child. Certain hours of the day disturbed me, some
disjunction of routine and memory. I felt taken
and rattled, like a package appraised by a child.

Puppet. Child says the child.

Child. The root of my ugliness has always been
my willingness to be changed. Show more
reluctance. The stuff worth praising.

POEM FOR THE SLEEPER

Somehow I come to not fearing you
little child
with your eyes lights of lakes
on the moon

Child of their imagining
where did they take you from
strange bug

Sister I dream toward
smallest peaseblossom
who grew silently under the heel of a leaf

POEM AS EXCUSE

I do not admit to any extraordinary
capacities—

my tastes are bright
and various as five dozen

chrysanthemums shifting
in a tub of water

their profundity
beyond chastisement

my errors
shy as seed

THE NIGHT AS FAILURE

The film opened with a landscape,
Los Angeles, Greece maybe,
many women walking in processional style
from one side of the screen to the other
dressed in white robes
picking their way across the scrubby hillside.

We heard something from the projection booth,
a wiry shadow appeared on the screen,
and then the ushers were around us
bobbing with apology
pressing tickets into our hands.

You pointed at the marquee and shook your shoulders
in a new gesture. I walked you home the usual way,
left you at the door.

Down the street figures shifted beneath park benches,
furtive as crabs. The alley at night
a flowerless arbor,
an orchestra pit filling with steam.
I quarreled with a trashcan,
repented, gave it my ticket, hurried off.
In the park papers skidded over the grass like moths.

SONG OF VEXATION, FOR TWO PARTS

I enjoyed those times with you least.

Each day brings a new disappointment.

Is my moroseness over-heavy?
I see you begin to chew your lip like a vexed mule.

Boredom in its multitude I have well versed.
Familiar as a hawk to a sparrow,
I flee to the bedroom, assembling my things.

What of our letters?
The conclusions were carefully scoured
of intention. I wrote with enviable loveliness—
of trees, commonplaces, cliffs.

Have you read them since?

Many times over I relished certain turns of phrase,
redundant as a lecher.

What a gallery of longing!
I have seen all these works before.

If only you were sad as I am sad!

Then how sad we'd be!

Shaking our feathers across the lawn—

Sheets of falling feathers. In the manner of rain.

When it rains, I will think you are touching
your face.

I will not think at all.
I will walk the street all night laughing.
I will pull faces in dark storefront windows
& eat whatever is offered me.

Your joy menaces me in its largeness.
Merely its shadow sends me trembling.

Your heart is timid & loves small things.

How a cricket loves its legs or the grass.
How large is your heart, then?

Whaleish & ranging.
I mow the turf of the world with my teeth.

Do you find your happiness convincing?

Not in the least.
Nothing convinces.
Only the rapturous or not.

I lack imagination. Have not even found a name
for you.

I have no name for you at all.
These devices are tired, resolved as a book.

It may be possible to become brave by thinking
less & less.

VISITATIONS

a hare that sprang
from the gutted belly of a stag
instantly devoured by the hunters' black-lipped dogs

I have fed the dogs

the virgin who lived in the branches of an oak
who never touched the ground
when a farmer cut the tree for firewood
a naked girl came tumbling dead
before she hit the ground silent
as a snapped neck

left her body

the boy said three toads approached him on the road from the graveyard
one with a pipe
one with a feather
one with a silver sword

the rest of the story incomprehensibly in tears

PARADE FOR THE DEAD WITH CLOWN

Tears as a cavalcade for the crowd, whipped up
with the horses, circus-quick. For the occasion

the grey horses have been painted black, their backs
dripping, marbled by the rain. Sieve of the gutter:

a child's glove, a mask, a leash. None of this indicative
of anything besides illness, I swallow my candle.

I swallow, forgetting to stub the flame, buffoonish
and proleptic. Fear like a spur, like the shadow

of a face on an open page. My chest opens with the readiness
of a secret door. The hollowness of a false wall.

DIEM PERDIDI

on every ferry ride
I have suffered misgivings
sense of one's body towed

I have never ceased completely
that secret practice
but carried on the brutishness
in hiding
what I have made

I explored the island
waspish with humility
despising stones driftwood a few early
shoots my heaviness laying over

the fields like a blight
draught of listlessness
mislaid papers

brighter colors?

in Greece eating cheese
I was gladder even
easy task with bare shoulders
torso narrowed to a book's width
wrapped in the traveler's ecstasy

days where the possibility of disappearing became brightly lit
and nearly no heaviness to waking

longing
with no name
I could name it
and repent
thorn of spring
in my heel
I speed to the river

starfish of my liking
many fingered blue tipped hand
rippling in the other room
you are crying not near
to my deathly inattention in which I imitate the dead

CLOACA MAXIMA

This is the easiest world conceivable
After such zeal and expenditure

Knocked about like a shoulder swollen with bone.
Chief among my pleasures this vaulted cell

Roomy as a bilge, straw-strewn and large
With fantasies, slim garrote freighted

With over-heavy gems. My amours (called
Despair) thrill and go quiet, meek as petitioners

Shelling pamphlets. Henceforth you are barred.
You've never struck the girl stirring timorously

In her chair. Tutor yourself in acrimony:
Make her repose below a ceiling

Of thickening violets. Make her swim through
Fields of mountain snow, nipples, eyelids

Pinched with ice. Let us resume our meetings
In a worse season. A battleship lanced with cannonballs

Let me rest on my side, like a bundle of reeds
Trimmed by a child between bouts of sobbing

Forgotten for a moment, then added to.

THE INVENTION OF CANDY

Candy was invented on a rainy day in Vienna. Herr Winkler was arguing with his Frau and, to illustrate a point, began to box her ears. Her face flushed all the way to her scalp, her face a bright red apple burning on the kitchen table. Winkler became quite animated and began to jump and kick his feet like a cheerful spider on a string. He was a small man, built like a pony, with tiny brown shoes. She was the larger of the two, stooped and thick, with fine snowy hair which Winkler used to floss his teeth between meals. *Du süße dumme Frau*, he sighed at last, tiring and turning to the window. He was old and impatient, worst when angry. A tooth had come loose in his antics and he tongued it grimacing. To his surprise it was sweet, almost milky, seemed to sweeten the more he sucked at it. His mouth curled like an infant's round a bottle, the sweetness piercing him. He sucked until his body sagged as from a heavy meal. His wife stood to clear the table, rubbing her jaw with its dainty beard. Her skin glowed with good health and there was not a trace of malice in her movements. As I said, it was raining and if you had chanced to look out across the ashy street, their house would have seemed to shrink to the size of a china cabinet and rattle like loose glass.

PULCHERIA

The inhabitants of Pulcheria were continually carrying on love affairs with one another. In the noonday sun the public fountain glittered with discarded lockets and rings. When one affair ended, the next began. In the afternoons they met at café tables, pressing each other's hands. In the evenings by the canal they trembled and parted. Almost innocently they cried and struggled, wrote, *We cannot continue*, folded notes into agreed upon hiding places. There was nothing insincere in this; each new passion was sad and tender, more tears shared than kisses. Neither were there gaudy jealous scenes. The alleyways, even empty, resounded with sighs. The inhabitants went about their errands cowed by private suffering, especially gentle toward traveling street vendors and noisy dogs.

HAVING RECEIVED MANY VISITORS, A REGRETFUL CONCESSION

why in this body have I become
a larger thing?

Book: more dust swallowed
than the throat of the oldest hourglass
you go flying mouth open
with your lamp

a nightjar catching moths
frigates of dust
fusty flying carpets
that is where
if I stabbed
the air
it would shriek

Book: stayed in your room a week
waiting for the rash
counting envelopes
the ailing postman
thinned to a blue coat
a hand of dog treats

in the shop-windows' eye-whites
my books boil with waves
in the city I do not recognize
the monuments I have built
park to park I go inspecting
pleased even to find children climbing

Book: you mouth them to pieces
preferring terror to night air
water shot through with ink
an alpine spring rolls backwards
tripping to a sleeper's ears
the guilty wake instantly

my laughter's wince
has been hateful to many
assured of my correctness
I depress the crosswalk button

AN EXAMPLE DRAWN FROM LIFE

1.

The rope imitates the anchor in a downward-falling gesture
not shuddering as it brushes eyeless fish or
further down, oddly furred things not alive but moving.
The rope carries itself despotically downward
as though a self-punishing
laughing thing.

2.

In a devotional gesture of collapse my soul dangles
bat-like from your piano stool.
How you play with complete indifference.
Later I learn it was a player piano.
Your thick brown braid
giving itself over to the left half of your face
the sound of many levers jerking with delirious abandon.

Helplessly wrestling
to get up and run my hands over your things
I lay in bed very still, remembering your open drawer
how they glistened like rare skins.

I WILL BE GLAD

Eye: pronounce us happy
beyond misapprehension and I will
clap you with the ardor of my guilt

The Unhappy: silence be my stiff rebuke
I have spilled much over this solitude
shed this coat quit this hour
the prison-house does not unnerve
but your fingering of the keys

Eye: when I go here I go longing over there
stick in hand gleeful stamping earth
I am the boy with the stick
batting at bushes

Teeth: retort retort

The Unhappy: we are alive to every disaster
thrilled with cheek till we've
tongued it
when we believed ourselves most happy
the curb came lunging at our laps
teeth in loose bouquets
pavement to damask

Eye: sewn my lips with neatest needle bites
stem this invidious flood trust my voice this little
skin flapping way a sail envies
impulse of wind a wave carries
ox-tough at the shoulder

Spleen: dismal as marriage

The Unhappy: too much mastery given to absence

Eye: flimsy as a painted egg
rounded with ribbon the truer shell
take nothing from me
and I will be glad past doting

TO THAT FORMER SELF

Who ever told you a cave by the sea was a fine place to die?

As a child you stood
from your mother's beach towel
and walked into the water
till the current towed you out by your hair
like a paper kite.

Your mother and the sunbathers
came running till some stranger
grabbed your ankle
like a giant, indifferent bird—
the memory of his face lost
to the myopic eyes of minnows,
angels and those ones you called x-ray fish
transparent and fleshless darts,
the fish have seen.

Soft child, I cannot even reproach you.
Your sadness wreathed you
like a cloud
pacing the school quadrangle
shivering in the shade of a pine.

Children are so keenly disappointed
but you were not—
only baffled.

A twitch around the valves.
You had a shoulder bag packed
for the occasion: tool, note,
Walkman. Something churlish there
hidden and retrieved.

You are dreary beyond mocking.
Your inclination to the sea
almost gaudy, I will not
tease but watch
how a piece of me quivers
now like a living beetle, f
tossed or falling ribbons
shivers of real joy.

SPRING BETWEEN VISITING HOURS

Relief is the right response
when an ugly thing has died.
I have counted these up,
crossed out the days of the calendar
like neatly eradicated rats.

In the hospital there were mountains
on every wall opposite the windows,
some with sunsets, some without.
You sat by the largest in new socks,
touching your hair.

I handed you a book with Ovid pressed
between the pages—I wanted him to slip out
and speak to you once I had left.

Adjusting
in your seat, you explained
they had taken your shoes.

Last year I woke up at 3 AM
under a sprinkler's halo
drinking with the grass.
I am always so thirsty.
I could drink a neighborhood
of lawns straight from the faucet,
the dog bowl, the drain.

Me, when I've lost myself
amongst hedges,
behind shower curtains:
a heavy wineskin
rocking with sentiment.

FRUCTIVOROUS AND WITHOUT SPEECH

When I visited, you sat eating nothing but oranges, pointing from your window to the street below. Feeble but nonetheless lovable. You flung another peel to the table beside what you called your talismans: a skunk skull, several unopened letters, a heap of poppy heads, a coin worn concave on one side. To my inquiries about the letters you explained with barely disguised annoyance they were ones you had written yourself but never intended to send. Written to whom? What did that matter? With a shrug. It hardly mattered who read them. From the window I saw a young woman walking on the street. She seemed unsure how to carry herself and continually shifted the position of her shoulders and the speed of her steps, as though in accordance with some inner train of thought. When she disappeared at the end of the block, I felt an inexplicable pang. In our silence you grew timid, drawing your legs up to your chair. Why should one bother washing? you added wonderingly. The beetles will be my handmaidens with their fine small combs. Beginning to feel unwell and having nothing to say, I reached for my jacket. There was an etching beside your window set in a delicate pearwood frame. Neither of us looked at the other as you spoke and I tread quietly toward the door. Your mind had made of it a perfect replica, you said. There was no need for superfluity.

PRO CAUSA

In defense of gentleness I nod
At your armature, its greenness
like the open hands of leaves.
Shield of a commonplace.

Too little bile in that blood,
For that have we made you unwelcome.

Dove of my afternoon,
How you go winking at the air.

We kicked the sidewalk hasting home
As if your softness were some peril
to be dodged. Have you seen this,
Pursing your lips at such slightness?

Face drawn downward like a stem
Through the mouth of a vase.

I have been surprised to grow
More pinched than I suspected,
Heart rioting for clemency.

In my childhood I spent hours
Shredding flowers in the yard.

Soon as I have made an argument
To school you in harshness,
I have dissembled it.

Toilsome kindness ever shivering,
I worry at your fountain,
Its bright narrow jet tapered to nothing,
Shedding coins, quitting verse.

PRECEPT FOR SOLITUDE

Enclosed in this letter find a ribbon and a mask.
These are designed to frustrate.
Have we not compared our lineages
conspiring side by side?

You sketched your coat of arms in the dust,
our lines sprung from the same frauds.
Digressors, hands beneath our cloaks.
Fasten the mask.

Take the letter opener and cut the mask
where it fastens at your nape.
Observe how it falls,
like a phoenix cuffed midflight.
Observe how the mask mouths its words.

In years your skin will harden to a statue's and the work will begin.
They will not discover you
interpreting the shadows of the garden,
consecrating the fountains, laughter in your throat.

SOMETHING YOU COULD LIVE IN

LONG AND SOUNDLESS LAUGH

The letter in my coat's breast pocket folded like an eagle's wings, sleeping, now beginning to stir. On each street corner a gendarme in my father's uniform lights the lamps, his face lit up from one side, greenish and oiled. I have wasted in dark canopied bedrooms, left leather bits of my shoes across the floor. The alley-doctor prescribes the salutary vapors of the wharf, where I duly go to clap my lungs. Fresh nets heaved onto the pier continually, shuddering with eels.

CROUCHED AT A LITTLE LEDGE

1.

The street darkens with
Branches, arcs at every
Angle like whips frozen
Mid-air. I

Don't care to shovel
My sadness about
The way some
Encourage. I leave

Mine fallow, better for
Admiring its expanses, its deep
Blues and greens
That is just

An impression. Sometimes
I come alive with
Extraordinary violence.
My hands, legs

Twist about their chores
Like the sleek, happy backs
Of dogs. The door is
Open, come see

Me, come watch. Let us
Have languor—
Tip that oil
In your palm. I will

Drink it that way, with
My chin. Bring some
Night, it's much simpler
Then, the scheme

Of moving parts smudged
out. I can hear you
with the radio playing.

2.

What about travel, traveling
in the open? Will I be
greedy, bouncing
like a villain? I'm too

sick to harm. Once
I was a terror. I sent
away for dresses, smothered
dolls, filed my teeth.
Let me be where things sit
or are still in the garden.

LAST GASP

Most happily benign dead spirit
Who leaves dishes clean
Who restores shattered cookery
Dear invisible hand
Give us happy self-acts
Summer arrives with a blow to the head
Fearful full of concern
Fumbling in the water
One apprehends the other
Through the fog of the phone
Veins unraveled to other matter
You impersonate me in Texas
And neither is glad
Pursed faces bowed heads
Rows and rows the garden
Empty but always well tended
Drooping devilish bows the wind takes
Stamping his shoes

ARTIFICER

Child: Mother is writing a book and when she finishes it, I will be dead.
 Gold brocade, gold thread, gold throat.
 A book, when it is finished, becomes a dress of flames.

Brother: When it is finished, you put it on.
 On our walks Mother collects bitter grasses, very serious.

Child: Mother calls herself Mother.
 A snake bristling from a branch pretends it is a yellow noose.
 Where is my brother? He is not following me.
 Do you see him?
 That is his shadow.
 He is up high waving hanging from a branch.

Brother: Opened up
 my organs bob, half-sunk islands listing south.
 Sewn shut again
 snug at the ribs with tailor-tight stitches
 my skin snares my form like a custom gown.

Child: Taking his arm, Mother hoists him to the sun.
 She says,
 What I have written will say what I say.

MIMICKRY

Their happiness could not exhaust itself and when she left
he stayed behind. Pacing the old idea even once he had a better one.
Pride bristling like a charger's mane, the green war mask.
Dragonish twinge of melancholy, marshaling its grievances,
the canker somewhere above the thigh.

What crude encouragement in the bearish tenor of her laugh.
A barking catalog of gestures he revisits as a permanent exhibit.
A statue hollowed out with leaning begins to talk,
mute as a counterfeit coin, sneers like the tyrant adjusting its robes.

STOMACH CHORALE

- Napkin.* From the kitchen table you watch the Pacific
disgorge itself in seedy waves. Saturday
the seaweed lay on the sand in wet ranks
drying their blades. We sanction
your disquiet in gracious folds.
- Child.* I have dismissed the early years from my table
as though they were a series of disagreeable
meals. Choking on dislike, I starve
the afternoon, tugging on a little bell. Bring us
aspic, a dish to wrench.
- To lie in bed all day, face against the windowpane!
- Bed sheets.* Give us your thrill of fever, delicious
sweat and rouge. Have we delighted you today?
- Child.* Your reply is the quiver of my hand.
Soon as I have plucked disinterest
by the ankle, I am bitten at the wrist.
Like a gravestone in marshy ground
I sink beyond retrieval.
- Windchime.* Ply yourself with greenness.
You may pretend to busy your grievance
but the attitude of the garden is a nice one.
- Child.* What's the use of a bandage?
Bring us night that knocks us,
heavy as a bat with full belly,
soft and soundly on the ear.
- Lamplight.* We nursemaids take turns wringing
our hands in efficacious shifts. You
are never unguarded by our worry.
- Child.* If you care to,
make me bitterer, false-bottomed
as a jar crammed with air. Preference
slimmed to nullity.

GALL

How dismaying this being with others. The notion
replete with harnesses, buckles, a dashing gold bell.

I live studiously as a book, trusting myself this little.

In conversation I fervently believe whatever is
said & only later puzzle for a long time after.

I have become increasingly unknown
to myself. Bewildered beyond consolation
I jog through a city in which I have become lost.

Some artist took a series of photographs of you
as a child. You showed me the photo album, face
turned away, a small silver wheel lifted for
inspection.

Such difficulty choosing where to focus my
eyes. I kept frowning so that in the end
I settled on a napkin as a blindfold.

I admire your compunction.

So do I.

SELF-STUDY

The chair's self-regard is galling,
its angles like the child sleeping
with his arms around his toys.
I scratch my head till chunks
tumble over my face, thinking
of children who array their toys
neatly, who are taken and clutched.
I love their surfeit of love,
the labors of the man who baits them
with a twitching finger, guts them,
and turns them into saints.
These miracles dazzle to agonies.
I require the floor for my oblations,
disdain the bed, stare for hours
into my opened thigh.
Prayer is best when uninterrupted
but I am childless and so I am hungry
and must, from time to time, take bread.
God knows, there are fish at the bottom
of the ocean who take their suppers candlelit.

CORRESPONDENCES

for Max Sebald

In the morning I realize woodenly, as if recalling
the approaching anniversary of a death, that in the last
decade I have not recovered a single new memory
from the supposed treasure-house of childhood
but only frequented an exhausted repertoire of early scenes
—dead rabbit, naked boy, ficus, fog. A dragon costume
many yards long bristling with twenty pairs of children's shoes.
I barely lift my eyes to examine these scenes, halfhearted
as a tourist raising a camera, recognize them heavily
and obliquely as one recognizes a friend's meanness
over dinner. My imagination cowers against its trellis.
Of course, there is no preciousness to childhood; what has gone
was as disagreeable then as living now. I turn to the book
I put aside the night before, which you finished writing
thirteen years before. You are ill at the train station as you write
in your notebook, your other hand resting round a glass of beer,
I hardly know where I am. In your dread I recognize my own,
as one recognizes a gift one will receive on some future

PALAMIDI

I repose for an afternoon in the sunlight
of your dungeon, the ceiling long vanished,
grass billowing the walls like a simple
tapestry. In a garrison like this I was
once a statue blanched by sun, rocked
by the cannon's dyspeptic blasts.
If I had arms, I can't remember them.
Ahead of me a red snake measures out
the battlements in lengths of himself, sweeping
the flagstones with his tongue. Keep me
from the siege-works of the lower lands;
keep me at your turrets and crenels, my hair shining
brighter than a helmet, arrows wheeling like gulls.