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Men of New Orleans

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Stephanie Dickinson

Men of New Orleans

I

If I cut my eyelashes there would
be no feeling
I would have to move my ear lobe
between the blades
or the tip of my nose to know
about touch. To show you
how gentle I am imagine a mist
or a plasma bag barbering
your bangs, shaving you bald.
Orchids thrive in snow and spongy soil.
Most are hermaphrodites. An earthworm
loses its head and grows another.
It is both male and female. The hagfish,
a self-fertilizing neuter.
Look, these fins are my hands, this
tallow melted to bone, my flesh.
My neck thinks of me as its lily stem.
Wandering toward the French Quarter
under a fang of moon, I know my future.
Mutant, I sing in a beautiful whisper
a brittlestar that lives underwater.

II

Born with a baby penis tucked
between my girl lips, I got
my period at twelve. Mama rode her
white horse over and over my briefs
blossoming with first menstruation.
No son of mine bleeds, she screamed.
I shiver listening to the river, the oil barges.
The Mississippi ruts with Chouteau swamp.

Magazine Street breeds surly magnolia.
Sweat drips from my eyelids. I walk the streets,
strange beautiful names, Ursuline, Dauphine
Elysian Fields, Mandeville, Marais,
Heat collects in the cunts of camellias, in the eaves
and gutters. Everything's in suspension.
I'm a hoop-skirted belle emptying my chamber pot
on the heads of Yankee soldiers,
a Storyville sweet girl swathed in silk kimono
haunting gardenia-thickened parlors.

III

You can hear the thugs pull up, sometimes
they run at me with full beer cans,
bicycle chains wrapped around their
fists, full of steroid-rage, banging fifteen times in my eye.
I taste *the knife slide between my ribs,*
missing my heart and lungs, whoever pushes
does it slow so the point only bludgeons.
I see myself on a gurney
in the cigarette-butted entrance to Charity Memorial.
The drip-bag far from the water hyacinth
and mugginess. I'm in a hospital bed
no, a Royal Street nightclub,
black and white mezzanine, needles
stabbed into my ceratoid artery.
Why am I naked except for the swamp slime?
Men in white-cuffed shirts
toast women who drink from goblets and
smear lipstick like butterfly wounds.
I've brought mosquitoes with me.

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IV

*My lonesomeness comforts me.
Our Father who art in New Orleans
hallowed be Thy name. Kingdom of the
Fiery Throated Hummingbird
and White Alligator Thy will be done.
Yea though I walk through the shadow
of the pirate Jean LaFitte
I will fear no evil for the Sapphire Throated Egret
art with me, the Yellow-Crowned
Night Heron, the Steamertail and Kingfisher,
the Captain Zoom Swamp Tours,
the trombones, the she-crab soufflés, the grasshopper brandies,
dusk time and the bayou.
Amen.*

V

*Sometimes I love water.
I love standing tall.
And then I grow small—
a tree lying on its side.
a dugout canoe floating off
into the Egg Nebula.*