Error Begins a Joy Unknown

by

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I.
The Boil Lance

His mouth grew hard and black
as a corded phone it rang all afternoon

*fuck oh fuck* the voice said

my mother took him on her lap
in front of us pulled his jeans off
so the pistons of his legs sighed
apart we could see the outline
of his cock through his underwear
we could see the tropic of hair
on his thigh a boil exploded
into view scarlet and swollen
the size of a golf ball in his fever
we saw how his tears darkened
the couch cushions his fingers reach
for hers my sisters parroted his cries

*fuck oh fuck* they said my mother
took aim my father shuddered
under her touch she drove a stab
of silver through my sisters screamed
the puss ran outside a purple fist
opened and the magnolias bloomed
Awe

I confess, I touched myself
in clear view of God. I knelt

in the tall grass. I knelt
beneath a bramble of stars

in the strange weather
of the universe and felt the musk

grazed field pressing itself
to my mouth like a wound. My mouth

to the dirt. My kingdom. What does it matter if nothing here is real?

The wind still tosses the laughing sunflowers. The loons will rise off

the rippling lake like an idea.
In the crushed yellow

of this dream, I am busy
inventing shame.

Forgive me. How nothing can lift its bright stain.
Lethe

If sequined tank tops drift down the canal
toward a mercy called forgetting,

if clarity is a mattress flung
from an Astro van on the Parkway,

if the florist faints when the lock is turned,

if the orchestra aims its French horns
at the silence,

if outside the burning house a girl
steps into sumac,

if her yellow spacesuit,

if she glints inside that wall of poison,

if like the jeweled center of a clock,
I mean I—
Rejected Turing Test No. 47

when did you first know music exists
outside your body like the future
like welding sparks / an overdose
does the hospital not resemble a
school for the dying
catholic boy with a lisp
whose bruised mouth would you kiss
choose one to save: the smell
under the bleachers in a fire drill
of alfalfa / a meteor of wet hair
contestant #1 pick a hand
contestant #2 define loss
for example is it an empty palm
/ this slap across your face
& if so how does it feel
to learn you are precious and extinct
Error Begins a Joy Unknown

The boy who sold us
lemons was stung twelve times
by bees. Now his wrists are cuffed
in sores. Every word

he writes is honey, every curse
from his fat mouth drips
gold. Cut one open.
So hard. So smooth. Look:

here is the exquisite
machine of my life.
Nude in Apiary Veil

Bruised, you drag a match. Snuff fleas
from dog mange in the kitchen dark. Come,
sweet beast. Tell me what you fear losing most.

A bouquet of horsehair, of nails: love.
The rat trap snaps shut. Then another.
Another. And down the hall,

my heart is a man in a red windbreaker
swearing he’ll fight any pussy, any pussy at all—

to enter from the outside, as in, he beat [   ]
until [   ] shed his mother’s dress.

Say nothing of your accident. Youth’s smashed
cloche. How like a library after the fire:

lemon trees, their neon. And last year’s
child beauty queen walking to work.
Lady & Gun

My sky hurts. What’s a gown if not the folds
of a cunt / a river / a prick of blue melting
toward a deeper blue? I am silk taffeta & plinth.
I am perfect bust cut from the stillest stone
loading my polished gun with a click. O Lord,
shadow in the crease, light finds lace, finds wrist,
and the cuffs of every sentence in every tongue
are sewn by a child’s hand, tinged with I love you,
but I can’t. Of the girl with skinned knees: there is
nothing but film unspooling softly from the bolt.
Of the dark theater: only the dark remains.
A voice saying, open your eyes: and I do: I do.
Dear Star,

It’s true. A body is a Buick: four doors. Its broken locks. Nights I couldn’t sleep, my parents threw me into their worn, red leather backseat and drove until the weed choked coast. In my dreams, I saw my father disappearing. New York, the shed. A blaze of aster, where my barefoot sisters would bring him a slop of milk in a highball glass, their unbraided hair fanning out at the waist. When the wind blows, it opens like a yellowed letter that begins: 

_I was here, I was here, I was—_
* 

The lake out back like a busted TV.
Same show playing: rippling black
static. Azaleas. A pearl comb with no
teeth. And if I stare hard enough, I can see
Ma in front of the set, her face painted
blue in the magic light of the dog races,

losing her faith 10:1 as Panzer’s white
throat strains through a cloud of dust.
If he won, I’d get a dollar for the pick—

the neighbor’s boy could be coaxed
to play, and I’d give up all I had to hear
him lift the fiddle from its case. The clasp
flicked. Horsehair and hollow. The desperation
it takes to turn to such broken things and sing.
* 

All night the Kmart sign. All night thunder.
Or the thunder of moth wings.
Or the white storm of the moth itself,

flitting against a cruiser’s tinted glass,
dragging its shadow through this collapsible
town like a cape,

where you learned to keep your mouth shut
so no one would lift
your name from its velvet case.

But sooner or later rain will break
the silence in a curtain of torn beads.
Buckshot on the steaming hoods.

And if I could, I’d tell you over and over
what it is that lightning says to the summer trees.
II.
Litany

song for dog collar
song for straight razor

    for epidermis & Dakota

    for clock when moon
    stops telling time

song for bassinet
& hypothermia

    for .45 & parakeet

    for the stained glass
    of a baby’s skin

    for the light that pierces
us merely like rain
A Minor Role in Which I Play Myself

I meant to tell you how the blind
are immune to color.

How our lives are held
together by the word

*will* like a gold paperclip. But you
kept saying that male bees

are called *drones*. That work
is another name for *labor*,

and our mothers had to pry
us from the hive between

their two legs. Then the tapes
start playing. We call them

our childhood. Always the faint
smell of ozone as though someone

has just come out of the pool.
There is no pool. No water

to drown in. Just the endless
sky: an immaculate blue

case around our heads softly
piping oxygen in, our one breath out.
Amnesia with Gold & Fur

For you, I would carve a box

of finer grain than memory, false-bottomed, locked—with punctured

f-holes you could press your ear against
to hear the breathing. Now your fork
is a clutch of sisters that never touch.
The knife, do you recall? Ends tragically,
finally, without question. But what good
is this hoard of pictures with the names
peeled off? This Matryoshka?
This goose served with its egg intact?
Though now the winter seems warmer without
the words for [chill], and [ice] returns
to its proper place: the fifty-first key
out of fifty-two. So play me something, child,
that’d make Salzburg blush, rushed
and breathless as the lion you saw at the zoo.
Try now: she touched my neck while I read—but—
all I remember are the curtains. Is it true
that everything you say is turned to gold?
Try: dandelions, gilded spoons ...
Try again: the chain on the brass reading lamp,
the brass reading lamp—Fine then, turn the lamp on.

What color is the carpet at this hour?

The room? The hour?
Fugue for Voice & Strings

(after Saskia Hamilton)

The strings were tightened at either end with a winch. The winch, if you tightened the strings, groaned

and the strings bloomed nickel, reeked blood. Held to your ear its body echoed like the raking of ocean waves. But a nun

on the bus said the waves are just the blood in your ears. The silence of the instrument was too loud.

A blank score unfurled in the silence. *Play*, she said.
George Spencer Millet’s Fifteen Birthday Kisses

1. one shirt .79¢ ruined
   neither watch nor wallet but a thin gold
   chain w/o crucifix fixed
   at the throat  22k & warm

2. suit $2.00  a breast-tear
   in the wool of it
   draped like the skin of a skinned rabbit

3. one horn button, one (replaced)

4. .35¢ in the pocket

5. shoes unpolished $1.75  the left heel
   whittled down to the wood
   (the right a little smaller)

6. & one handkerchief wrapped like a bound foot in silk,
   which I should say is red
Name?

Gertrude Robbins.

You knew Millet, yes?

I am no killer, sir. The truth is a boy with a girl’s shadow; the rest, sash-like, spills

To where?

down tower stairs:
shafts of sun, third floor of the Life Building.

And you’re there?

Oh handsome tie, not much knotted as—
and talcum ripe beneath his ironed collar.

A mother’s work. Fawn-folding, blonde.

His eyes?

Smoke.

His lips?

Two brown bees.

Saying?

Saying, “The Main sank eleven years ago this day.”

Did you love him?

I keep thinking of his address: Pleasant Avenue.

Do you love him?

Heart-pierced, staggering. I feinted at—then girls, sir, girls, oh swarm
And after?

A slate evening.

And inside it?

A black carriage drags
his body into the news.
Officer, you’ll forget, they say—

Except now and again I catch the face

of some child twisted like sailcloth

turning in the twin turbines of joy or despair,

and remember the way the gash puckered

under his blood-wet shirt, the shirt tearing away

as easily as onion-skin, how lice

kept on biting at his cooling scalp

and from the knife-slit, like a mouth,

whispering, (a breath expiring, wind let go from

the final paddock) what matters is we touch.
The Miniaturist

(Paris 1871)

I.

Enclosed is my winter my hurt my cloud they would have no more of me if the rebels win and the fighting is pitched in the streets horrific this morning I saw a woman pull a cannon like a mule les communards are melting silverware for bullets I think this war will be fought fork over knife and the hungry will have to eat the sky I forget myself enclosed is a house for Emile you said he has outgrown your arms he takes no mind to tennis or piano no sport in shooting game let him have this then I’ve had no paper or ink so I stay awake a long while remembering the house last spring and my body betrays me its noises
II.

True it was old the garden too meted out too lace cuffed for our taste but what
an air I used a robin’s egg for the door it was not easy the birds let loose
even from the zoo there is talk three soldiers shot an ostrich dead such a ghastly sight
but thrill and behind the blue door the parlor glistens with a chandelier not antler
but chicken bone sharpened to a web the floors you’ll note are lined with fur no small
task a clipping of the maid’s hair on the sly little by little while she sleeps but the war
continues outside there is less and less each day in dreams we are terrible and complete
Kingdom Come

In the end there is nothing
to forgive we are all carrying
our small crimes to the clouds
are carrying dirty particles
sometimes rain sometimes not
all lives are playing at once
like at the movies I am
you are what a strange
distinction when the wind
is about to tear us apart
Music Box

Left handed in the garden
of filth and filigree,
you can’t break, sister,

what is not whole.
Not the soft teak box
and its locked dancer.

Its silk-footed
tune mute through winters.
A shade of green, once

opened, plays the whole
day through. If anyone asks,
I’d say the happiest sound

is when the string finally snaps.
III.
Locket on Common Gold Chain

*Aflame:*
caught in the pale blue refrigerator light.

In the darkness is there another darkness?
& if so, what is her name?
Worry Doll

What I fear most I know now is not the public shame of being caught like the homeless man masturbating behind the law books, nor the catalog of horrors that can befall an innocent, as the story goes, *en route* between divorce and AA, not the low-broiled affairs above a fortune teller’s blinking window, nor a life as short as a stray tire rolling down the FDR—but waking in the middle of an odorous night: ammonia, wet garbage, (somehow, impossible cedar)—to a toothless cry and the dogs bellowing back, and the lurch of silence that I’m beginning to understand is your answer.
Country Road

You can always count on an accident
to articulate the corners where two lives meet.

    The past was one line. 
    The present is a second. 
    The future will be a body hurled

through the windshield.

—And yes, there are elements
not yet in our design.

Turn to page seven,
Life and Its Plots.

Suppose A woke
between the news and “White Christmas”

from a dream of wisteria,
gas prices, and cold door knobs,

brutally aware she no longer loves her husband.

For it is possible to put your head
on the pillow of one God,

and in the morning find your king
has wedded the country to another.

    Branches break
    under the weight of ice.

Things give suddenly—and you’re back

behind the wheel of this second-rate life.
And there is the turn to consider.

    There is the matter of B. 
    His tires. His teenage hands
    not yet roughed with asking.

Asking himself, am I happy? Was I happy
before I wondered if I was happy?

    A cloud of starlings will burst
from the snapped branch.

His lights will find hers.
There is still the matter of the turn to consider.

In the police report,
it is just now beginning to snow.
Wolf Scout

While bathing, they stole your clothes from the sandy shore at Lake George. You rose nude from the water and followed their girlish cackles a half mile through the scraping pines. The mosquitoes bit your bare, white ass. Your cock was still a child’s. A sword with no edge. A yellow flag burned against the deep greens where you found them in a huddle over your muddied clothes.

The first fell hard to the ground, his body a log split by the canoe paddle you cracked against his head. The other pissed himself with fear. Years later, you’d tread the unbroken forest of your marriage with the same calm. Still naked, still asking, *who did this?*
Roberto Bolaño and I

I was leaving the Angelica Theatre one night, when I bumped into Roberto Bolaño drinking with some friends.

“Bolaño,” I said, “is it true you once asked Cardenal about heaven?”

“Yes,” he said.

“And is it true this heaven holds a place for sinners and sodomites, for stray dogs plowed down by drunk drivers to bask in the orange mange of Providence?”

He nodded.

“And is it true this heaven he spoke of abhors all money but the flesh?

That both men and women spread their legs for a taste of your earthly tears?”

“Sí.”

“That Cardenal put his arm around you and whispered,

look to the dead end of your faith. There you will find Him?”

Bolaño looked at his shoes.

“The girls in their silks, the orgy of colors
the symphony of mad roses—

Was it all as promised?”

And swallowing, he lifted his head,
his eyes watery and bloodshot.

“See me now,” he said,
“would I walk this earth
if it were so?”
Take Two

November & snow & snow. They look up at him from the runway of the table: his wife setting down a bowl of peas, an uncle lighting his cigarette with the flame of a tapered candle. The children have given up on eating and run through the living room with flashlights shrieking, I got you, I got you. You’re dead! If you look closely, you can see their breath traced in frost before them. Our father ..., his wife begins. They bow their heads. From the corner of his eye, he can see the ash gathering on his uncle’s lapel. The glint of mismatched silverware. His niece’s lips moving soundlessly in prayer. He can see the faint outline of her breasts beginning to bud under her red blouse. The slow spring of her body. Even this wish has been borrowed. These troubles inherited. The god on the wall, tarnished and hand-me-down.
Home Video

You say, *pick one thing to save*. My bike. My life. Gold

with bravery. This prayer spooled in black tape

for posterity. God

willing, I’ll carry my cornered heart into the green

hills of the future.

Fast-forward.

You say, *every man is a wilderness he cannot cross*.

The frames skip. You say, *no.*

You say, *burn everything.*

You say, *home is a damn light that won’t go out.*

The frames skip. You say, *finish the bottle.*

Off-camera your battered
laugh. Your glass breaking

against the dark kitchen
walls. Against

the hard walls of all your wives.
Collision Theory

Forty years ago, the town would flood Watsessing Park so the kids could skate over the surface of the earth. I don’t know why I’m telling you this. Maybe because the snow tonight on I-95 looks like Swarovski. Or because the swerve marks our tires made in the snow, their clutch and release, remind me of the figure eights memory cuts into the carats of ice. The long swoop. The departure and arrival the eye can follow into the wooded ditch where his car rests smashed into mine. No largesse of light. No wings but those of the winter birds. The ones that roost in the dark months and my father pulling me out through the open roof, whispering, god, oh god. But no one ever tells you how the deer will pass in a thin line and trample your sense of despair. Or how you’ll smell his aftershave and forget the radio is still playing through the shattered
windshield. *Spem in Alium.* Tobacco and patchouli. One flame extinguished in another – no, one light concealing another. The way my feet sink in his tracks. The way his headlights swallowed mine until neither of us could see. You know what? I think this is how our lives change. Not gradual as a hand sliding down a leg. But sudden like the cellar doors flung apart. The ice sundered beneath your feet. We’re like that. One of us drowning. The other drowning to save him.
Hunger at Tompkins Square Park

My father rides toward me on a silver BMX. His spokes tick over the leaves. His hat cocked to the side has NERD blazoned against black matte. He’s fifteen again and looking to score. Looking to fumble his hands over the clasp of a bra, to unhook himself from the chain of desire. I know his face. It’s my face. I’ve seen it in the twisted snarl of dogs so hot to savage each other, they strangle on their coiled leashes. In the embarrassed faces of their owners grinding on the last-call-for-heart-break-dance-floor as the house lights come up on loneliness and sweat. Yeah, it’s nice to walk under the refrigerator light of the moon, the hand that holds my line, slack for a night so I can put in my eight hours thinking about God and fair trade and wonder who he’ll be in ten years. Maybe someone with the balls to burn all his money. To live in the woods like a terrorist or Thoreau. The wind runs
its fingers through the Tompkins trees.
He jockeys up on the seat. Let’s his red
vinyl jacket rustle in the breeze. Who
is lost enough to mount the empty chrome
pegs and ride him through the oblivion
of this night? He spins the pedals like the
chamber to a gun. Anyone might. Anyone
can come and lie under this congress
of branches, under the democracy
of shame this public park offers freely.
Maybe that’s why he steers to the left
as I stride over the grass. Maybe that’s why
his grip tightens on the handlebars,
why his pace quickens. Maybe I’ll pull
a knife and make him strip against
the Hare Krishna Tree. Maybe I’ll smother
him with the fog of my pain. Take his blazing
-white ember in my hand
and ash it out. Yes. Maybe that’s why we both
drift our separate ways: into one darkness
called memory: into the other which is forgetting.
Or failing that, in the widening arc
Of downcast leaves, pitch
the first stone against a pane of stars:
roan pigeons breaking
over the dappled water: ministers of loss
caught in the rippling muscle of the night.
Monarch

The voice on the radio was the voice of a cat caught under the wheel of a tractor,

crushed, really, and married to the field in a mile-long wake that flattened through a city of rustling corn.

(Oh, well) I fell in love with it recovering in a hospital bed.

Alone, I turned the dial and let the only thing I could control out for an hour or two, like the canary

my sister would slip from its cage:
a gold smear orbiting above our shorn and laughing heads.
Flicker at the End of the Hall

Like grazing a stranger’s hands
a second too long—all shock
and ripple.

A dull ache.

This is as close as we’ll come
to the end.

The brilliant
gold wire startled to light.

Our brief fingers touching—

O body, take me
to where this all began.