

CARL REISMAN

Oregon to Illinois and in Wyoming

Passing through
some worn town
far from home
and where we're going.
It's dinner time.
Baby sleeps in back seat,
Jean looks at spread-out
map in front.
Restaurants go by
where folks eat steak.
Jean says she sure feels
like a juicy one,
but no charge cards,
maybe enough money to get
us there
if the car doesn't quit.
Jean folds the map
as we hit the two lane,
digs into the bag
that rides between her knees,
smiles,
makes peanut butter sandwiches
again,
which wouldn't be half bad
but for the
sand.

—*U.S. 20, 1986*

Advice for the Prospective Hero

Set forth to heal your father.
We all are the third son.
Be pure of heart
and polite to the dwarf.
Follow his advice and
knock three times on the enchanted
castle's gate with the iron wand,
throw bread to the lions, and at the fountain
in the courtyard,
before the clock strikes twelve,
fetch a cupful of the water of life.

You can improvise a little—
free the captive princess and steal
the magic sword the dwarf forgot
to mention.
Don't bring home your two greedy older brothers
trapped by the mountain—

but if you screw up
and find yourself in double dutch
weather a year
saddle a horse
and ride smack down the middle of
that golden road to your
beloved
and it will all work out
nice.

Ghosts

Summer
in Memphis
no one white
stirred
except us
playing baseball
two on two in the Slaveny's yard.
Invisible men stood in for us
on base
quietly
when we went to bat.

I remember from those
games playing outfield,
a long fly over the pines
into the front yard
of the colonial next door.
The black man mowing
stopped, picked up the ball,
tossed it underhand to me,
and I ran back through the
pines, heaved the ball too late
to catch the runner or ghosts
at home.

David Slavney, a sore loser,
quit then,
and I walked away
down my street,
the pavement so hot
that I was sure,
just ahead, it had
turned to water.

Venetian Morning

always
the flow of water
from the iron pump
into a tin bucket
so that you don't much
notice
how it percolates
through your dreams.
first the bells
wake you, then
gulls shriek over crustini
like stuck sea lions.
in the campo
a dog snarls,
a woman pushes
a loose-wheeled cart,
foot steps echo—
everything echoes in this city
of alleys and glass
and water and stone.
a cough,
“grazies, ciao,”
then up the stairs of
ponte del santo cristo
to make 52 vaporetti
at Celeste

always,
always the ticking clock.

—*Venice, 2002*

Night

1.
I wake in Black John's grotto
and have no idea what time
it is,
only that the crickets
chirp and it's night.

2.
If there was a full moon
I could reckon how long
until morning, but the moon
shines its gibbous light
on the sea, and I know
only that dawn will come
hours before it finds horizon.

3.
To be alone
far from you
whom I've fought so long
that my body is an
argument
is to know that without you
night would find me
still

4.
The ocean
the ocean waves
the ocean waves' crash
on the coral
resonates in my chest
as if I am
their drum.

—*St. Croix, 2000*

Morgan's Second Northern

The second fish came
like the first
with the evening ducks.
Morgan felt it as a pull from the left
and after a struggle
emerged with fins scattering
yellow and green light.
Walker carried her to
the cook log
while I searched in vain
for a knife.
By the time I gave up
and took the pike's head off with my pocket
knife, the pike had breaded itself
with red sand.
Morgan carried the snapping head to the shore
for gulls,
I sliced open the belly, emptied out the heart, intestines,
sliced it, paired the spine,
whittled her down
to four fillets.
The second fish
I poached with scallions, garlic,
mushrooms, soy sauce, served with mashed potatoes,
pan bread.
The next morning, as I drew water
from the lake, I saw her
scales glittering in the gravel
like a thousand eyes.

—Feldtman Lake, Isle Royale National Park, 2004

Day of the Dead

Smooth rocks
worn round by water
graves to mark the dead.
The living have left
their painted names
upon fields of stone,
secret messages, handprints, farewells.
I move beyond the markers, past the freight
cars packed with circus animals,
past the incense cedars
down to the intractable
ropes of kelp,
dig my hairy toes
into the shore,
skip a stone towards
Japan
and count the circles.

—Urbana, 1997

Italian Restaurant

As we walk up
the waiter
runs down five
flights carrying a
mouse in his cupped
hands,
sets it free
next to the cathedral.

Mouse
is not
on the menu.

—Antwerp, 1998

Kettle

I leave to you
all the low and hollow
places, every trap & crucible
I've forged or stumbled into.

At best, my bequest
will brew you tea
or boil water for a back country
birth; at worst,
you'll simmer in your own
pot.

But there's even
pleasure in that
and plenty
of company.

I trust you.

You can take the fire
as black and seasoned as
you are,
and you can call me back
with a whistle.

East of the Sun

There's a white bear
knocking at the window
and even now
your father is bartering away
your hand.
You remember to fold into your
cloak a few keepsakes—
a key, a ring, a
lock of hair.
Your sisters cry
alum tears
and your brothers
size up the bear,
cough, return to their
quartet of hearts
where the youngest
has just shot the moon.

Father hops towards you like a crow,
folds into your muffler a shard of
chocolate and a knife,
mutters words, a blessing
or spell.

You climb on the bear's back,
hold his scruff, and you're gone,
east of the sun
west of the moon
which is just to say
that it is all the same to
you whether you live with
man or bear. You've
longed for an opening and this
surprise will do.

True Desire

I woke at dawn
In my room with zodiac
wallpaper.
Maybe it was Sunday, one of those
rare days when my father didn't
have to catch a bus, my mother
go teach school.
I don't remember what I needed—
possibly a bathroom escort
to ward off Abraham Lincoln's
ghost, whom I recently had learned
was haunting the White House and had his sights
set on Rochester, New York.

I walked down the hall.
Perhaps it was summer.
My parents had thrown
off the covers and sheet
and slept side by side,
my father in boxers,
my mother in blue night gown.
I felt like Telemachus in a happier
story with no Trojan war,
who wandered away from his nurse and into his parent's
chamber, marveled at the sight of his father
strong, his mother lithe,
bound together tight as a bowstring,
and like any ordinary child faced with
an altar hewn from an olive tree,
forgot what I had come for,
or decided it could be had
without help
from the divine.

Kindling

The day unrolls like an elaboration
on the word blue,
cold, clear, clean, flat,
the air built to transport
the knell of wind chimes,

the road to bring
the restless home.

It's a morning to perk
in a glass pot,
spread seashells
on the maple floor
and drink coffee black;

after noon, sharpen
knives with three stones, mineral oil,
and a steel to skim the burrs.

Split wood at dusk
with a red axe,
stack it in neat piles,

and night, rub together
sticks,
kindle & burn.

Of Cats and Men

There's a tenderness
to a place where wild cats
are fed by old men.
Nobody bothers to trap them.
The cats live in the hills,
and with the arrival of the men,
emerge from rhododendrons, aloes,
cactus, rub their flanks against
palms.
They will not let the old men
pet them but eat the bread
the men bring in plastic bags,
then vanish.

Nobody traps the old men,
either.
Together, they live wild
in these hills.

— *Girona, Spain*
— *October, 2005*

After the Hurricane

A levee gives.
It does not apologize.
New Orleans dissolves
like sugar in tea.

For this disaster, God omits rainbows.

The Army Corps scouts for a giant sandbag,
an even bigger claw,
and a helicopter to drop it in place.
But the helicopters are in the lower
Ninth Ward pulling
people from roofs.
The water keeps rising
as officials look for answers
cribbed on a drowned
man's hand.

The truth is
that there's little
we can manage
and less we can grasp.

A Few Offerings to Katrina

A carpenter remembered
that his grandmother who drowned
in Chalmette
kept jars of crooked nails
in her shed
and wouldn't let him buy new ones
when there were good bent ones
to straighten out.

A lawyer whose
mother died when the water reached
the rafters of her house
missed her Gulfport voice
and pillbox hat.

a New Orleans cook
recalled that in the days
before air conditioning
his father would sit on the porch of their
Creole cottage and invite anyone who passed by
inside to eat. He said he learned
from him that
what you own
is what you lose.

