

A Brief History for Ventriloquists

Its Egyptian inventors would describe
how it erupts from the belly and plunges
into the world, seeking air from inside
the chests of others, often dead
lovers or compatriots; how Caesarians
saw seminal Christians elevate it to god-
head—a divine nationalism crafted to last.

Our own glossolalia is secular, nearly
inaudible, found in temporal boundaries
such as those between generations:
the ones who crossed the sea to set a flag
on the reddened shores at Dunkirk;
the ones who held their farthest point
to be somewhere in the wetlands of Asia;
the ones who remember a beginning
but nothing afterward, for whom there is

no manifest destiny and no *forward*.
It isn't like family reunions are anything
but summits; we can't grapple
with our grandparents at some bank-
turned-donnybrook in the Dust Bowl—
as if they'll forget where they end
and their children begin—or converse
with those marines who stuck their hands
in used cartridges in '68, as if some
things were incapable of emptying out,
as if the frontier could dance away
and remain uncaught, goading us on

to find our own voice, to explain it
with Jesus or Hoover or Trich Quan Duc
or the simplest allegory of all: *the World
rests upon an Elephant, that Elephant*

*upon a Turtle; should anyone ask Elephant
what Turtle stands upon, he replies,
"It's Turtles, Turtles, all the way down . . ."*

If You Ask Your Attorney To Be Concise

When he speaks, it will not be to describe those neighbors you were born to,
whose boys like grim ferrets poked their heads out the weeds
and stole caps from your juiced Honda; because he knows you loved life
in the neighborhood / and may even have loved sending

your furtive retrievers, like warhorses, out to battle with the locals, and did
treat them well—your retrievers—once they'd plunged
down hillsides with red tongues and upturned noses, doing so only
because you'd asked them to, and sometimes meant it / he won't say

you believed in those dogs more than the three sons who were taken away,
though he knows you did, and knows it was because
they could better ride the downdraft of your discouragement, and had no fear
you would betray them / if not out of love

but because you, too, thrilled in the loose, uncertain spaces of the mudflats,
and thwarting a hardscrabble policeman, and were of course the one who
once, in a defile so bannered with vapor and sleet in grey hooks
even the mud spat back, fought one / and did so thanking your father,

your real father, for hitting you so hard, so often. So your man will say little
of a spindly wife who beetled her way through the valley leading off
and away from you, the intemperate years no more than a desultory jumble
in the back seat of her Duster / *good riddance*

is all you said to her, *good riddance*. And from this din there isn't any sound
your advocate will extract, not a single note he'll find to ride this chaos
home—not the snap of the infant you in a washer,
or the teen you cradling an oily pistol / or the eternal synaptic you

who might find, in the thinning daylight ahead, that one ferocious moment
to live in forever, in which there is no love left
but the love of those moments which precede every moment of regret,
obscure lullabies / with nothing to hang their words upon

but the bony grapples of your wrists, which your defender may briefly touch
as you turn to go—blank as a principle—into the stairwell
which leads you down to those men who, loveless but not disloyal, take odd
pleasure / as so many do / in knowing they'll never see you again.

