

GREG MCBRIDE

Blind Date

You rode my bike's crossbar. Campus
was crisp that last college fall. Your hair,
gold and fruity, teased my lips--.

Your scent was close, and far.
Your cardigan lapped at the rise
of my knee. Your plaid skirt swelled in our breeze.

I am pedaling into our future
where you will overcome my awe.
It's a long ride to your room this Saturday night.

I feel your glee all the way.
At the door you drift to me, close.
We kissed for the first and last time.

Tu Do Street

Hunkered low on Tu Do Street the bar lay left
Of Hotel Rex, its door a gaping cleft

From which 60's protest songs pricked long nights
Beneath the black-sky drone. Like blinking kites

The C-130's hung still parked in time,
As if they knew this war would play like dime

Store novels--secret plans, high level talks,
French onion soup, the bombers bombing docks.

She floats, pink gauze through light--her tea, our sigh--
The heat, the want, the brush of her ao dai.

Our City

Towering dreams lie molten,
bones and steel heavy
at our feet. We read
our lives as Braille by day
then rise in ball and chain
to plod against the aching night.
Twin pyramids
of human scrap and chance,
stunted, soar toward vacant sky
like songs resounding dread,
like songs their wine now bled:
entreaties shed
like a cape of ash
by a distant, deaf Divine.

Carpenters

Carpenter bees are eating my garage.
They chew perfect bullet holes into the soffit.
I do care. I spray deadly stuff at them
that stains the blacktop, like my leaking car,
and I feel a queasy grief. They're black,
the size of my bruised thumb, and noisy.
They tend to business, the female deep inside
beside her eggs. I hear their distant fizz.
The males forage and buzz to menace
whatever's passing near. The weekend's here.
I've missed the dusk and now it's dark,
and under eaves those open wounds are hard to find.

My mother steals in to remind me how—
twenty years before the loneliness
of the 1950's housewife,
the existential boxing, the depression
and the alcohol finally killed her (just before
she could have seen that bastard Nixon go)—
when vacuuming she'd spot The Reporter
or Saturday Review luring her onto the floor
for hours on the failures of John Foster Dulles,
twirling her thick, dark hair. Meals a problem too.
And she liked to sew, but it all took so long.
She wanted it right, but it took so long.

Then there was the time we moved again.
When building a spare-lumber ladder for Mom,
I took a two-fisted, five-year old's backswing
and buried the claw end of a hammer
deep in my head. Both of us hysterical,
swimming in blood, she set out down the sidewalk,
me under one arm, my little sister
the other, on a hunt for bandages, tape
and Mercurochrome before I died.
She found them and saved me.
So here I am, battling industrious
carpenters in my mind, lingering
over an article on entangling
beta-amyloid plaques, relentless
in my brain, wondering whether Mercurochrome
might save my garage, or me, again.

Home Visit, 1951

In central Texas dry wind sifts
the powdered surface and no quarter section
holds its own. Mother took our hands
and led us out past the '32 Ford
on cinder blocks, past the tractor,
ancient red leaning into weeds,
seat peeling where the heat vents poked through.

I wanted to climb the tractor, but we walked.
Behind the farmhouse, we could see our father,
shirtless, digging himself into a hole.
Wide back wet in the sun, jaw set, he smoldered,
like a steam engine, and with each shoveled strike,
his hair tumbled wave over wave onto
his forehead, a golden surf of sweat.

She walked in dime-store sandals, ramrod prim,
the full white skirt of her sundress tossed
by each step, eyes fixed on the horizon,
as though she wished we weren't there. She didn't sound
like her sisters. Aunt Billie Doris
chewed a syllable like gum, loving the vowel,
pulling it out in a swoop. They all did.

We walked, and the labored calls of milk cows
beyond the barn grew faint. We stomped
scrub to hear the stiff crack against hardpan.
The house, its windmill and stooping tree,
sagged against the sky. The screen door
hung loose. Grandfather Gussie and
Uncle James rocked on the unpainted porch,

our father digging still. All around us
the stubble roasted in the blowing haze.
Our joined hands were moist,
my feet hard-baked, heavy
as oven brick. Behind a low mesquite,
our mother told us to pull down our pants
and squat. She did the same.

An Office with a View

Nothing prepared me for living in the sky.
This steel and concrete pencil spires
toward the clouded underside where urgent
messages dissolve as the world scrawls by.
Across the child-size street below,
a massive crossword tower blinks
randomly awake. The tiny cabs lurch
like amoebas clothed in yellow hope.

A muted morning light has gathered,
slatted from the east. The hard-to-match,
three-cushion sofa loafs, off-blue, between
totemic lamps, inscrutable beneath
their burned-out bulbs. Perhaps they'd shed
some light on the truth of matters here.
I'll have to ask Diane to tend to that.
The teal and mottled carpet sends up
scampered notes, like fairy dust that might
transform a life or perhaps the in-box
memoranda here for me to sign,
in vain if yesterday is any guide.
And these journals piling higher on the corner
of the desk nag like questions unaddressed.

The sun burns through the mist, ignites and sweeps
a silent ravaging of fibers, one by one.
Teal flashes gold then blue, the plain's afire.
I ride my father's shoulders, July 4th,
beneath the sudden conflagration
and thrill to lean, to touch the sky, above,
below, the luxury of this spot in space wholly unforeseen.

After Memo-Writing

Like the apple picker crumpled on his cot
counting russets by the thousand
falling round his head, I am burdened
in my sleep by the weight of memos past,

as from their yellowed pages spill the ghosts
of public service whispering in my ear,
whispering nothings, were they somethings?
not so long ago, by my reckoning of the years.

The prose that got me to this kitchen table
bought this paring knife, this place, in which
I slice an apple fallen
from the apple picker's sleep, and sleepless,
taste the loss of memo-writing time.

