

The Beauty of Drowning in Southern California

They were a glory din of bigger boys
and *I* -- I was a dark uncertainty,
a small shy scheme of a boy hunched
by the edge of the magnolia-shaded shallows
of that backyard swimming pool,
in whose boisterous water
my dangling feet were stirring secret plans.

Then all at once the other boys,
like autumn geese exploding into flight,
burst large and laughing from the pool,
their slashing rapid bodies flocking raucously indoors,
for they were a party commanded by someone's mother,
while I was a little brother quietly invisible
where I'd been left beside the pool:
and it was what I *wanted*.

The calm was sudden
in the jasmine-scented backyard garden,
sudden, too, the water's silence at the pool's far end,
its silky ice-blue surface undulant beneath the sun's hypnotic pulse,
the light's intensity a dazzling invitation,
and yet from having watched the plunges of the bigger boys
I knew the water there was deep:
but it was *also* what I wanted,
to swim like them,
like them to delve into the water's silence.

Soundlessly I slid into the pool,
slithered snake-like down into the cool-warm silky water,
for, like the snake, I was determined
to be neither missed nor noticed,
and though my feet touched bottom still,
my hands held hard on to the beveled edge
that lipped around the pool,
held hard on to my secret plan
as hand by hand I slowly edged my way
toward deeper water.

It was at the pool's far end I stopped,
stopped where I sensed the water to be deepest,
and there the world waited,
the jasmine-scented silent light
of that particular California *waited*,
waited as my small shy scheme clung to the edge --

and it was there that I let go.

What happened next I hadn't planned for -
as, expecting that my body like the goosey bigger boys'
would take to wing upon the water,
I was instead surprised
to feel my face slip easily beneath the surface,
surprised my eyes could clearly see within the water world,
as drifting downward,
easing smoothly through the slow dense calm of that aquatic ether,
I felt no fear,
felt fortunate luxuriating in its liquid light,
bedazzled by the patterned squares surrounding me,
square by inscrutable blue square
a mystery repeated for my meditative drift,
before, beside, behind me,
a radiant redundancy of geometric turquoise blue --
until with an ecstatic suddenness
I recognized them as ceramic tiles,
the turquoise tiles that squarely walled the pool!
and in the moment's recognition
I conceived of them as *beautiful* --
until with drowsy ease
I touched the darkness at the bottom of the pool.

And *beautiful* it was,
the turquoise tile radiance
whose color I would recognize again
in older ecstasies on Costa Rican shores --
beautiful the very word
my boy's particular of mind invoked to name that blue,
a word I had not known I knew,
as beauty was a vision I had yet to see, though knew on sight --
and O how *beautiful* my brother
who found me, still and curled,
asleep upon the pool's maternal lap,
and by whose saving breath I live to tell.

His Hands

My father's hands were beautiful –
grim graceless hooks when hanging slack,
like twin rough stones when clenched,
at work articulate and quick,
their knuckles like ball bearings,
their nails discolored, jagged, sharp
like broken bits of Neolithic tools –
when meeting him a second time
bigger men avoided shaking hands;
when walking with him as a child
I would clasp his index finger.

Sometimes his hands would suddenly
enclose my waifish waist
and sweep me lightly overhead
(but was I breathless then with terror,
or was it pleasure after all?)
and in the blue sky of his eyes
I felt myself forever flying,
flying free of anger's gravity
-- until he lowered me into his arms,
the cigarette clinched in his teeth,
its burning tip close by my cheek.

Once, crouched small behind the easy chair,
I watched the household tragedy
square off my brother's man-child fists
against my father's fearsome outrage –
man taunting boy to strike first blow,
boy silent but defiantly on guard,
each wronged, each wrong, each broken-hearted
by the instant when my father's sudden fist
met bone-to-bone my brother's cheek --
man self-appalled, boy proudly tearless,
as my mother wailed between them.

And now those hands rest laced
together on his breathless chest,
a sculpted gesture of contented calm
they never knew through long life,
composed expertly for our public grief –
but notice how the crooked fingers
don't altogether *fit* together,

have *not* completely meshed in death
as they couldn't mesh in life;
notice how their twisted tendons
have resisted even this last brittle grace.

Blue Heart

Hailing me by name
as I walked up the narrow road that passed his place,
as I looked up from the open book I had in hand,
core struck, heart on edge,
though not quite zero at the bone -
as he, with a salesman's smile, said to me
'You're into poetry, right?'

Were they fighting words, I wondered?
Was flight an option?
Or did I have the right to find my notoriety amusing?
And really, what the hell could he be smiling at?

'You're into poetry, right?'

Why do you ask, I might have parried?
What do you mean, I thought to answer?
Well yes, is what I said.

A quarter-century we had been first-name acquainted
though I didn't think I liked the guy -
too glib, too friendly, too damned pleased with life -
'Come here,' he beckoned me onto his patch of lawn -
his *dooryard* Whitman would have termed it,
and so-help-me there were lilacs blooming.

So I joined him on the grass, a massive boulder there,
eight-foot across and high -
'a remnant of the ice age,' he was saying -
boulder, ice age, glacier-in-retreat,
to all of it I nodded my encouragement
as he invited me to circumnavigate the rock,
as he explained how he'd just cleared it
of a generation's brush and vines.

And he went on,
describing how he'd taught his kids to climb the rock,
showing me the hand- and foot-holds,
to which I smiled with something like good will -
'But look at this!'
-- he stopped us in our glacial tour,
pointing to an indentation in the rock
where long ago a child's hand had painted a blue heart,

the height and size of a childish head.
'I cried when I discovered it,' he said.
His face was open, touchingly sincere,
and then he said, 'You could write a poem about it.'

I might have laughed out loud,
might have shaken my head in proud refusal,
but only a heart of stone could be unmoved by his request –
though in my silent pride
I scoffed at how he thought that poems happen.

Robert Frost called poetry *play for mortal stakes*.
I doubt the stakes Frost had in mind include blue hearts.

And yet something was happening by that rock,
something I did not understand but somehow felt –
he was a man who'd spoken tender thoughts to me,
and I'd been humbled as I heard them.

'We'll see,' I said,
and shrugged the way men do.
If not a promise it was something like consent.

But in the weeks to come I could not do it –
could not make a poem of that damned blue heart.
Though my walks still take me by the rock
I cannot find a poem there –
perhaps it's his to write.

Naked

Naked, moonlike in the dusk, you rise
above my frozen field full and white,
your slow insightful feet and flashing thighs
dancing - dancing their curved and urgent light.

Naked you wait, like a rock in rain,
ecstatically enduring Spring's rough measure,
each drop upon your skin a crystal stain
of deep impassioned pleasure.

Naked you lie speckled in the sun,
like a too ripe peach dropped from a high limb,
split open, juices leaking, flesh undone,
your fertile pit imagining its fragrant climb.

Naked like smoke you curl articulate
above my smoldering fire,
your ghostly voice intoning delicate
demands into the brilliant corners of desire.

Naked your eyes of sea and sky,
naked your open hand, like a nest, a haven.

Naked your hair of wheat,
naked your belly, like a morning in July, the warmth before the heat.

Naked your heart, like a bird singing,
like a warbler in the instant before springing into flight,

naked.

Immortality*
(While Awaiting the Subway)

What did she see,
that young and purely solitary woman
standing in the cool gray silence of the subway stop

as though composed by a photographer,
book in hand, intently reading,
her coral lips and quilted sky-blue coat

the only colors in that timeless light –
what did she see, as looking up
amid the turning of a page, her eyes met mine?

Perhaps I was a man
no longer of an age to hope
for her reciprocal regard,

though the truth is it was not at her
that I'd been looking,
or should I say not *only* at her,

but at the book
in which she was so deeply steeped
I had to know its title.

My eyes were good
though not so good as they used to be –
what is?

so as if to scan the twi-lit track
for the train I hoped would be delayed,
I took a step obliquely towards her,

until just glimpsing the elusive cover
of her book, just as her languid hand
turned over that transforming page,

just as her breasts rose up then subtly set
on the impassioned breath she drew,
which seemed in turn to lift her chin,

the dying cadence in a melody of motion
I could not help but follow --
until her eyes met mine.

What did *I* see
if not a shining instant of her wonder?
if not the lingering light reflected from

whatever fire burned within the words just read?
which in the moment of my marveling
was suddenly eclipsed

by her perception of whatever darkness skulked
in my beholding mind,
was smothered by a gathering gloom

of fear, contempt, and violation –
for *something had been violated* –
and in the mute unmeaning moment

of that cool gray gulf of time and space
she turned her back to me,
retreated up the platform,

then deftly re-composed herself,
her sky-blue back still turned,
the open book once more in hand.

The very silence tittered at my shame
even as a plaintive voice within me cried
No please! You don't understand!

*I'm not like other men – I, too, read books –
For me as well as you
a fateful train will all too soon arrive...*

I might have crossed to where she stood
and might have said these things,
but history cast its iron shadow

even on my dumb paralysis,
since in New York it's dangerous
for strangers at a subway stop

to seek an understanding.
And yet, how can I *not* remember
that her eyes were blue

and that the title of her book was *Immortality*?

**Immortality, a novel by Milan Kundera*

On Occasion

For this night's sake let us be an occasion --
let us make a feast of every least
mere moment as though our diligent elation
could raise the dead, as though all our deceased
dear spirits were mingled in the wine,
a rich bouquet of memories – then let
us drink deeply of them. But let's define
our feast of memories by moments yet
to live - above all we should eat and drink
as though this night would never end,
as though for these few fragile hours we think
ourselves immortal, as though on it we could depend.
Do you feel a tender presence in the air?
Our feast is its sacrament, our laughter its prayer.