

ESCAPE VELOCITY

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David Breskin

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Escape Velocity
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for Gerhard Richter

..... I ... Evidence

ESCAPE VELOCITY

Thrust then blur, ripe speed, a gentle pricking
of atmosphere into the black yonder:

carrying a payload of past-due bills
from father, mother's invoice of regret,

the backyard family trash exploding up
out of a watery basement, where shelves sag

under the weight of time, you muscle past
aimless geese and grazing clouds, staking claim

to a future unpredicted by corner
commentators, those who'd have you flail

and fall. It could be ghetto. Could be bones
splintery since birth. Might be cross-eyed stairs

you couldn't climb, unsolved story problems,
the needle of hunger. Or just every

dull day flattening mind into a thin broth
of *No*. Whatever. To trigger ignition

in such conditions requires X. You are
Y. Go ahead and throttle Z round Z's

fat neck: smell the aggression of incline.
While your visored helmet rattles and fogs—

eyes hammered into sockets—a snaky
tether provides your vitals to the watching

few and the greater world awaiting. Life's
not cheap at this burn rate. Out here there's

no air save your own breath. You've gone so long
not talking, words feel like food in your mouth.

WELFARE REFORM

Mr. Full, I'm Mr. Empty. Rub my bones
together to spark a wispy fire. Swallow

your pride, keep yourself warm on the oil
of my intestine. Try a little garnish

of wages on the side. Not like North
Korea where they're so hungry women

eat their afterbirth. Not like Tutsi / Hutu
holocaust chutzpah. Here, just plaster

from project walls and Twinkies with food
stamps while trust fund babies quaff ecstasy

by the lake. Oh, those happy happy kids.
Mr. Empty on the cellphone, without two Franklins

to rub together, coming to you *live*. I'm
moving in. I'll be on your wraparound

mortgaged porch. I'll be walking little Ashley
to school, keeping her out of traffic

and trouble. I'll be your sleeping bag, your
makeup kit. The Lakota used every piece

of the buffalo and I expect no less
from you. If you rub me hard enough

against the rough concrete of the voters,
my skin comes off like grated cheese.

Recover the chaise. Patch the frayed cord
of the tennis net. Resole that old soft shoe.

UGLY BEAUTY

after Monk

Qwertyuiopasdfghjklzxcvbnm makes no sense yet
represents a certain kind of logic. Samewise

Dubya's tax-cut fervor, jowls of Dick jiggling
to its bulldozer bump and grind. Darwin

didn't go for hors d'oeuvres or cocktail party
pleasantries, but is an A-list guest these days

in better homes and gardens. His gyrations
at the Belle Curve Ball were quite a sight: lustrous

tux bursting at its seams so *down* was his white-
hot boogie fever. Still, quashing the calculators

of the skinny rich will not remove dead presidents
from their bank accounts. Exfoliating the mole

from Cindy Crawford's glowing puss will not keep girls
free of warts or safe from falling on icy slick

magazine covers. In her mingy pleasure den, Beauty
buffs the silver with her hot and bumptious breath.

NEWSWORTHY

The actress imploding in the strobed flash
of fame. Or the universe expanding, fat
with stars, showering down pinprick pulses

onto the Very Large Array, scattered
with sagebrush and defense dollars. Angle
of twist, angle of assault, in raking

light of print, flowers into breakfast
poppy, bright bulb'd coffee, a narcotic
of facts. The mean dance craze, untethered

astronauts, faulty Christmas lighting spark
jolly headlines bellying their gifts of good
and bad in measured doses. *If it bleeds, it leads.*

Cozy heartwrench of moms breast-feeding babies
crack, gap-toothed smiling toddlers falling
off roofs (shoved?), a high school winning streak

of gaudy soccer: come one, come all, mingle.
Turn the knife over morning's warm muffin
or shoes-off scotch. Bleed photos and fill dead

air. Freeze the market's dead-cat bounce and gush
fountains of guesswork on layoffs, key rates
of interest and disinterest, while surveying

space for the deeply personal, like poets
driving wives to suicide—*Extra! Extra!*
Not One, But Two!—in self-cleaning ovens.

DUE PROCESS

How much they owe you? Boy: fourteen, gawky,
braces, B+, shortstop, oboe, debate,

shot. Deep in the spleen of some insurance
office, there lies a chart. On it, numbers

sweating, making out with ravaged facts: math
of ravishment, revenge. Who can play and who

must pay are different answers to deflowered
questions. Here, sharp lawyers pause for truth

and lunch. Every third pickle, every third
slice of salami or fat wedge of king

salmon paid for. Every third bourbon, tank
of ultra, phone call, pen, power tie, ream

of glossy, briefcase or business-class seat:
the fruits of your meager tragedy. But who

can afford hourly fees or court costs?
Contingency's all. You've lost before

you've won. Only losing big makes winning
big possible. When the check finally knifes

into your account, years later, the tear
wakes mourning's slumber. You still can't drive by

that school. Each bell a pure defeat, a prick
of guilt and anger. You stay home, with time

money buys, and in your victory garden, grow
childless vacations: shame's plangent harvest.

MOSAIC WIPE (*Palm Beach Story*)

Like I said
Like I said sir
I just got these little bits and pieces
Little bits and pieces
Of memories

All I remember was getting through the gates

Mosaic wipe
Big blue dot

All I remember was being in the hiding spot
And seeing the little red light
All I remember is having a phone in my hand
And getting it to work

Willie Horton
Willie Smith

Were you standing up or sitting down?
Were you crouching down?
Was it dark in the kitchen at the time?
Did you have any difficulty dialing?

Did he have any clothes on?
Was he naked?
When you said Will was trying to penetrate
What position were your legs?

I don't know

Would you like a recess?

No

How did he manage to get your legs apart?
Would you like a recess?

No I would really like
To get this over with

When there is penetration
Was it difficult or easy?

It hurt me

Would you like a recess?

There's just a certain amount
Of emotional display
We're allowed to have
Step down and stretch
Step down and stretch for a bit for a moment

Was the ejaculation outside you or inside you?

Willie Horton
Willie Smith
William Kennedy Smith

Was that ejaculation inside your vagina
Or outside your vagina
Or both?

I don't know

Did you try as hard as you could
To prevent the act from occurring?

I tried as hard as I could

You were not sexually aroused?
Not lubricating?

No

Thank you

Mosaic wipe
Big blue dot
Seven-second delay

Was your strength any match
For his strength?
Were your legs any match
For his?

No no no no
I know I didn't have
My heels on in the house
Because I would have
Heard my heels clicking
On the linoleum

Billie sings *Hush now*
Don't explain
You're my joy and pain
Don't explain

Do you have any specific idea how
Those pantyhose came off?

JUST ASKING

If you could kill anyone and get away
with it, who would you kill? Would you choose to axe

an ex? Would dictators dictate your evening
plans? Buddhists in our audience may be horrified

but who are they to judge? Dung beetles, aardvarks,
pythons in past lives, now they slaughter plants

for supper, thinking nothing (of it). Protein
like me or Mussolini or a free-range

chicken can run away when threatened, but broccoli
doesn't stand a chance: chained to earth, blindfold

on, cigarette dangling, it nervously awaits
its firing squad of calloused immigrants. If you

can garrote squash or guillotine corn with a clean
conscience, then perhaps offing an executive

whose calloused eye for profits killed thousands
would not pose such a stretch. We only kill

what we eat, rifles back the hunter in the crowd,
thinking pheasant thoughts in full flight, not

revenge. But when you kill someone you consume
them, in a sense. The way they consumed you.

STATE OF AFFAIRS OF STATE (*The Blue Dress*)

Lamp black, flesh tint, scarlet lake, cobalt
violet: colors of the president's deep afternoon

nap dance under his elephant eyelids. Now thong
pink, rose madder, and coral orange betray

a deeper purpose far beneath his cerulean blue
window shades. When the Cabinet meets, sap

green runs from their mouths. When the Speaker
listens, raw umber coats his ears. A true

cadmium yellow provokes the jugular
press, while handlers run interference

red, interference blue, and titanium white
at network filters. Fugitive pigments

pledge allegiance to one view, then shift
in time's breeze to another, ruining harmony's

chorus of inclusion. The glass palette
of everyone's expectations shatters so jagged—

antique gold and iridescent silver spilling
to the floor—that the chief executive can

no longer patch pleasure's damaged portrait:
all his handshakes and orations, future

memoirs, vetoes, votes, positions, his legacy,
the traction crackle of a fading painting.

DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

Lying in the rotting sun, shining white,
the embassy turns its air full-blast. Red
lights blink in the sweep of surveillance

and beneath the stairs, an earpieced mustache
bristles. Clicking jaguar teeth over trade
disputes and tariffs, the embassy mock

charges, chuffs, and pauses for a party.
Plush black Benzes push and wade, hippoing
into the complicated crowd, starched and sutured

with champagne. Exploding corks of advice
spring from the ambassador as he spends
the facts of his frightful life like small change

on strangers. In the square, the park is locked,
the wrought bars a zoo for creepers strangling
themselves to sleep, overgrown and dusty.

With tabloids folded and black suits frizzling,
chauffeurs doze, dreaming of their young daughters'
educations and leather that never

sticks in the heat. A bomb in the Accord,
parked just around the corner, is a glyph
of everyone's grave imagination.

..... II ... Well, You Needn't

CAPSIZED

in memory of Edward Lewis & Terri Kaplan

Fat Qawwals spin a deep circle of praise
with buttery voices, ticking tablas
and the breathing liquid pulse of silver

harmonium: *Oh breeze Oh breeze please take
the story of this speck of dust to the sun
up above.* A man, swimming among sharks,

a whole fractured night in choking water,
under the shivering bubble of bright stars,
talks himself through it. Around him, beneath

him: three hundred thirty-eight others die.
His wife turns to wax, kissing starfish clinging
to the bottom. His son, gone. When bodies

full of dead air rise to the surface, he grabs two
to use as floats. One under each arm, they buoy
him all night. Come morning, he cuts legs to bits

climbing over coral and crawls onto
a beach, where he's rescued by passing shrimp
fishermen who do not speak his language.

When a cousin dies, at thirty-four, in summer heat,
her baby plunging off the back of her heart
attack bicycle, riding back from the beach, or

another, at thirty-seven, leukemia, following
my father around the endless corner and down
the stairs, we reach for velvet tourniquets.

Try to stanch the flow. Try, can't. But every day
these bodies float us on our oily blood
seas. Every day we wake up or we don't.

HER, FOR INSTANCE

Her body now an overpeppered stew:
so much raunch through the years, leaving flesh

tallowy and slack. The bruised fruit
of her bony thighs and hips, rebar

fingering the too-ripe cantilever
of her breasts. Skin a kind of coarse

deadwood, cells dropping off in a blue fog
of cigarette smoke and backbeat memories.

On this corner, neon liquor and rough
trade coursing the streets in late-model

sedans, saying: *taste this touch*. She stands
with the other restored wrecks, giving it

the old lip lick, eyebrow raise, the old flash
and bend. Such a cult of quotation, groinish

euphuism, embroidering the cul-de-sac sentence
of the day. And this day following the others

with all the vivid piety of ritual and obloquy.
One obstreperous penis after another. A postcard

home to her son. A bottle of Jolt to offload
the taste. Spring blossoms floating above buses

on Bush Street, adding nature's saturnine slap
in the face to the parade of the indented.

THE JUG SHOP

The radio clears its throat of morning news and traffic as the chardonnays get dusted. A certain disrespectful grape is tossed around, then football and girlfriends, strippers, Osama, growth funds, gin, Iraq, and finally, football again. Faux sleigh bells clank at 9:18 when the first shopper barges in. She needs some help with sparkling wines. Her price sensitivity is probed.

The woman buys the Veuve Clicquot because she likes the label. Her brain and body are gavelled-in soon as she's out the door. The verdict: too much of one, not enough of the other. Floods and war, hooded men the talk show fare at lunch. No robbers come with masks and guns to suck at money's jugs. No earthquake makes the bottles fall crashing to the floor. Bells ring drinkers in. Doors close.

WAITING FOR THE LIGHT:
10:48 SATURDAY NIGHT

He tickles the cactus with small fingers
of water, alone in the fluorescent

store. In the twelve minutes till closing,
he's got filing to do, and math: candy

inventory, late-fee totals, cash count.
I've been in that store. I know the slowhand

way he searches for hard titles and sings
to himself, his gentleness parcelling

the oddball change film rentals always bring.
Who loves him? I wonder, watching from my car,

waiting for my life to change, heading home
with dinner to the same house he lives in.

ANGEL FOOD

The ocean of thought at the bottom
of the barrel, breaking like waves
questioning beaches, is all froth.

The game above our heads broadcasts
everything we're not: fast, agile,
rich. We watch with pleasure, washing

down our losses with this fiction.
The waitress has my mother's name
and is made of angel food cake.

No one mentions politics or love.
The freshly mown lawn of the pool
table reminds me of childhood

Sundays, but smells like spilled bourbon.
A bitter sun intrudes, throwing
shadows onto laps and caps down

on foreheads. This Sunday, we kiss
off everything that counts, drink it
dry, and laugh about the damage.

ALCATRAZ

The tongue of fog that licks my walls
is not a picture postcard. The crooked
street the tourists grope is the heart
of any inmate. Mine is gently bent
into a maze of wrong music and brick.
Water seeps and cracks mortar, seeks
the lowest level, like worms or trailing
candidates. Shaggy clouds slow dance

into oblivion. The warden's nose suffers
Burt Lancaster with a twitch but the plot
fades when he's shipped to The Rock. The cels
of movie fairy tales, the paper gushed
today, had buyers leaping from their chairs:
an animated auction, a forest fire
full of deer, the Beauty topped the Beast,
but priciest of all—the couple waltzing.

Trapped inside a whale or town is nothing
like a girl. Fess up. Call her woman.
And mind or body, call the cage a cage.
I remember loving her, the way prisoners
hate and need their prisons. She's pregnant
now, the word by phone. The baby's doing time
I think and do not say: nine months,
some vague possibility of parole.

WAY BACK IN THE VANGUARD

for Joey Baron

Compulsion. Not a fragrant garden stroll
among enthusiastic peonies.

And the hesitant piano soft-pedals
your prospects for finding a harmony

unhampered by busy signals and trash
cans bulged with yellow paper. An arch of solace

might spring up under heavy battered bricks,
a free ticket for sorrow's lottery.

When lights are low and couples couple deep
in leather banquettes of fractured standards,

press rolls and rim shots, the refrain pays back
the verses for all their grudging work. Who

pays you, pays you back. Stay in back, standing
by the pay phone. Listen quarterless for clues.

Call people you used to know, collect. Call her.
Plead the poverty of an empty bandstand.

VOID WHERE PROHIBITED

This is a frustrating type of song
said Hendrix about “Manic Depression”
while counting blown amp tubes in concert,

About a cat wishing he could make love
to his music instead of the same old
everyday woman. But single you will

dream that daily woman, any fat chance
of a trip to the ladies’ room, place
we start and seek all ends. Not surfaces

but hollows, treasury without treasure.
Absence of content and malice. Lovely,
she leaps your sleepless fences while you mime

a chewy advance into her infrastructure:
ball-bearing hips and braced ankled earrings,
vierendeels against the steamed breeze blowing

to the n th power, where n is a man
sitting at the huge drum set of his ego.
Splashy cymbals smell desire gleaming.

You are in the pink when you are in
the pink. Calendars and magazines,
bloomers under swingy pleated skirts

in Cowboy blue, the space configured
for your type but not for you. Abyss
of content and malice, what law refuses

you access? Instead: monthly dose of lad
rag perfection. A little rage builds up
sure. The violin concerto swooning

at the local pub swoons for you, baby.
Any advice Mr. Guy? In polka-dot shirt
and overalls, Buddy kicks his wah-wah

with a grimace and explodes into the bitch
riff he's been sitting on all night amid
scraping Stratocasters. *You haven't had pussy*

since it had you! Street corner putdowns
Dewey-decimala in every corner of your personal
library. Her lipstick laughs a hollow *O*.

Abscess of content and chalice of bile.
The snow turns bad before it even touches
your head. Virgin slush. Greased metal

rods of rebar in the poured concrete whine
to sour chords. Echoing with rust above
you, the empty stadium of all your wanting.

..... III ..Rhythm-A-Ning ...

LITERARY FICTION

A perfect stranger, he arrived with a suitcase.
But one guest, lounging under the doom palm

near the pool, knew what was *in* that suitcase.
She was a sulky testatrix—her purple

lips a volva of desire—and being that,
she bided her time. She wasn't asking

for trouble . . . she demanded it. Not
the trouble eustasy would cause her ex

shacked up in his beachfront bachelor pad,
but trouble still. She took a banausic

drag of her Lucky, and watched, as the tall
man with the suitcase vermiculated

past her to his balcony room facing
the pool. Room 233. To get that suitcase

from him, she'd have to create the kind
of casual and innocent gallimaufry

at dinner he might suspect. That was her
chance. That was her choice. When the band

started to shout, she'd slip something into his
olla podrida and into something more comfortable

herself. Soon, he'd be having a thrombus
fit for a Southern senator and she'd be picking
through the vomitus for that little suitcase key
that would change her life. She'd have to get
the good stuff quick, throw all the tired bumf
on the fire, light a match and leave. Oh,
and burn her hot satin black dress, putting on
some old galligaskins to throw the dicks off
the trail. What she didn't know, what she *couldn't*
know, is that the man with the suitcase, now dressing
for dinner in the shadowy light of Room 233,
knew well of her fissiparous plans for his jack,
and vowed he'd never let this Jill get so close
she could hurt him in that way. *Never. Never.*
As the bleeding sun dripped below the horizon
and the poolside band struck up its first koan
of the night—a ballad for no dancers, just the
empty strophes of windblown water splashing—he
took his own measure in the steamy bath mirror:
had reintegration ever felt quite like this

before? Here he was, all his furious smurfing
finished, his long lost facture tight, and now,

at the fag end of the job and perhaps his days
as well, here *sbe* was . . . again. Yeah, he could

deconstruct the privileging inherent in his gender
role, but how would that unwind his bind? And how

would that trim *ber* sails, with him still trapped
in the sweaty genre scene he knew he'd been *born*

for? He shaved, finished dressing. From his window
he could see her, a long-legged kudu with flashing

eyes, standing so peccant, smoking by the deep
end of the pool. He slid his suitcase under the king

bed, told himself she'd be the tutee and he the tutor
on this night, walked downstairs, and dove in smiling.

MILLENNIAL CURVE: A TORQUED ELLIPSE OR THREE

for Richard Serra

Not dead weight but live load: the hernia
of history ruptures any calm we carry

to the edge of the horizon. Dead calm.
Lacking owls' easy spin, our necks wrench

in backward glance—springs shot from age, cricks
grinding, pocking the periphery. Dead springs.

Is it dawn, noon or crepuscule? Every
flashlight speculates when the power fails

us, and in our urge to round off numbers
we make this deadline slow and sticky: *one*

*one-thousand, two one-thousand, ready or
not, here we're from.* Such the dutiful spouse

to excitable earth, sued for abuse,
trying to save it like always with sex

or the opposite of sex, a balling
Malthus of action and restraint. Take steps back.

Carry a seascape in your head to sooth
a teething baby. Let lions sleep a hundred

days without a single spoiling fly. Swallow
diamond pills to vanquish *limp* from your gaze,

turn the page on *tragic* with an umbrella
liability policy and a fine-arts

floater. Here's where things get necessary
heavy: torqued Cor-Ten steel collapses

notions of what's hard, soft and true . . . how
rust embroiders our assembly line of days

by stitching hurt to love . . . raw beauty plainly
cooked by cycling sun and rain, salt and cloud.

In morning's middle distance, the tumor
of front-page news begins to shrink and sky

comes clean, all silky and albescent . . .

INDUSTRIAL FACADES

for Bernd and Hilla Becher

Sliding pig iron loading dock doors under arches
A circular window of brick over scraped gates
Fieldstone trim fronting a tiny turntable

Vertical pine planks eaten inside out
Triumvirate of grandfather clock casements
Falling bomb under stepped stonework ziggurat

Leaden turnbuckle anchoring loads
Diamond stones like bordering cufflinks
Silver tube exhausting stink of zinc

Vomitory slots slice infilled sash crescents
Glass brick glazing in mortared grid glowing
Window bars lattice aureole of pane

Ferns sprouting from crumbled cornice
Penile shoot dropping down to dumpster
Spalling limestone whitens crenelated shed

Church of the gutter and bowing downspout
Rail siding door bricked-over and I-beamed
Punched periscope in horizontal triptych

Sodium vapor cyclops attached to groin
Siamese valves prick bulbous pipes
A box locked and marked with a large "F"

Feathery carbuncle of exhaust fan spuming
Ancient family crests pocked with paint
Spinning wheels off spindles lie rusting

Sunburned lips of stucco cracking
And a stairway's landing disappeared
By breathy spray of caustic gunk

A snuffed chimney amid blooming weeds
Seashell scrollwork tickling masonry
Iron-crossed entries sport pimply rivets

Giacometti canisters of chloride stand barely
Speakers jut like church bells in mid-toll
"1900" above the puncturing hyperbolic cables

Eyebrow of drain above vault against rain
Rusting candy cane of spiralled smokestack
A pigeon pauses on wedding cake roof ledge

Veined stack of insulated pipes snaking corners
Spool of telephone wire thimble on slab
Rosette of ventilation spins against suffocation

Fatigued axles piled like cords of fir
"X" marks the superstructure spot
Birthmark of white brick on the dark countenance

Zigzag clinker staircase in wash of steam
Swiss chalet timbers lodging cinder blocks
Chipped-tooth grin of smashed window

Scratched glass glaring fluttery light
Corrugated aluminum waffling stained snow
Double boilers heeling like leashed sheepdogs

Overhead chevron angling to train entrance
Effluvia tubulet bisecting black skewback
Chamfered corner and steely ellipse intersect