

No Safe Words¹

(apologies to Emily Dickinson)

Dear Master—it is tragic
how you lost your eyes,
scorched them in the afterglow
of Reason—I wish that you
could see how far
I'm gone
 without You...

I have no “safe” words, now,
to break my fall, to end this
endless descent into
remembrance—no tyrant, kind
or cruel, to ration out the pain
with sharp command, or even
to observe the slow
humiliation
 of the Will...

I fear that I am growing
careless of the boundaries,
the tutored limits of the Soul—
I am shorn of grief—and you
are not here to chart
my progress, or to keep
my mind
 from wandering...

*There are no safe words, love,
and none to write us home...*

¹ Appears in *disClosure: a journal of social theory*, 14 (2005)

[Selected for inclusion in the 2010 Houston Poetry Fest Anthology]

Eaten by an Angel

Her child was eaten by an angel. That's how
she liked to think of it— devoured by divinity in one
great swallow; just a morsel in that primal continuity
by which a higher form sustains itself through
lesser forms, takes only what is needed, and is,
in turn, consumed. But hers

was a mundane death, as natural as a rabbit
gutted by a fox, and just as quick: a slight
quiver, leap, and life clenched. It left her
cold, though she could hardly call it cruel.
It was just the nature of things. In the sharp grip

of morning she finds the empty plate;
famished, she had picked it clean before
the sun had even peaked the top of the hedgerows
around her garden. Even so, her pangs will not
subside—hollow truths do not sustain the simplest
appetite. Only the thought of angels, feasting on her
sorrow, savoring bit by bit its meager being.

**[Submitted to the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival Poetry Contest,
August 2011]**

Collection Title: “This Must Be The Place”

Poems:

“Etta’s Lounge, Laredo Smiles, Grady Plays the Blues” (80 lines)

“Scarecrow Minutes” (33 lines)

“Sabbat” (21 lines)

“Beach Boulevard/Hwy 90” (32 lines)

Etta's Lounge,

Laredo Smiles,

Grady Plays the Bluesⁱ

Early evening at Etta's and the kitchen's still
on fire. The smell of grease goes slipping out
the window, calling pool-dogs from their games
to a grimy counter and the last helpings of burnt
burgers and hot crinkle fries before the music starts.

And we are there like travelers at the inn, seeking
God-knows-what. It's the only place we've found
where the people don't dance like electrocuted
mice or the bartenders stare you down like strangers
on the bus. Hell, they don't even check you if you smile
and say the magic words...*oh yeah...*

The back room boils with wet anticipation while
musicians warm their chops on bourbon and a joke
with the pretty black girls who sway their hips
and laugh; the flash and sizzle of their eyes is only
slightly softened by their sorrows—but when it is,
they blink away the shadows with a dance. This
is not a place for tears...unless they will their way
into a kiss, an awkward grope, a slow-groove song.
The lights go down.

You and I move slowly, flowing with the crowd
that gathers by a doorway, low-arched and almost
hidden, that takes us down into the lounge: Etta's lap,
“the last refuge of the weary and the wicked,” so she says.
I've brought you here for the first time, my friend,
to let you feel the syncopated candor of this place; it writhes
into your skin, and wiggles like the life-worn woman who
squeezes herself into an old red dress every night to boogie
with the college boys who shy away from such...determination.
Let it go...

“Hey you!” the shout goes up, and the Upsetters kick the music
with a hop, a pop of the drums, and the horns begin to swing:
whiny trombone, trumpet, and a deep baritone sax sway like
three drunken, odd-sized pals stumbling down an alley.
They wake the neighbors and startle the folks who haven't found
their tables yet. “Don't get too comfortable,” they seem to say,
“we're just gettin' started”:

Come out here on the floor...honey let's rock some more ...
Come out here on the floor...honey let's rock some more ...

Your hand grips mine instinctively as we find our way
back to the low dark nook we call “the cave”; our friends
have pulled the tables close around a tired, tattered
sofa and we sink, snug into the sympathetic comfort
of that chair, deep and woolly like an old black bear.
When I touch your leg, you blink and give that wry
Laredo smile—the one, no doubt, that put the sisters
on their guard. We’ve never been so bold; but then,
we’ve never had the room to linger in this way, and listen...
The music changes.

Dancers take their seats, except for three: a heedless couple, lost
in the private echo of their waltz; and the woman in red who floats
alone in that wide, dark space. She will not give herself to loneliness;
instead, she’ll have it take her as the loa took her parents, wild
and defiant in surrender. Someone sings:

I’ve told a lot of lies...and I’ve been lied to too...

We watch her with unbridled awe; the terror
of that rapture steepens the room in quiet agitation,
until a tenor sax intrudes...Grady plays:

a long, low note rolls up from the floor, a primal
groan to let us know we’ve touched the bottom
and will have to swim our way back up
through the slow tempo and the deep rhythms
of his blues. He, too, plays as a man possessed
of something, older than suffering, older than desire,
or bitterness—a secret longing locked in his cheeks
like an old brown nut, or a vast dark ocean in a shell.
Despite our privileged innocence, we are moved by it.

Now I realize that all things must come to an end...

Moved, but not delivered, though we huddle
in our seats, watchful and receptive, late
into the night. Not yet, my cagey friend,
though the music rolls, like spirited waves
over a reticent crab’s feet, urging us out, further
than we’ve ever gone, further than we dare, so
that we can almost hear that other shore...but not just yet.
This is not our song, and that is not our home; it’s hers,
who sweeps away her memories with a dance;
and theirs, who find in it the echo of their mother’s voice;
and his who holds the saxophone like a long-lost
sweetheart, back again.

¹ Lyrics from “Baby Work Out” and “Looking For One Real Good Friend” by Grady Gaines and the Texas Upsetters, *Horn of Plenty*, album, 1992.

Scarecrow Minutes

In a fragile, greying weatherboard
house my grandfather sits

upright at the dinner table—sits
and stares out

onto a meager garden, the fruit
of his retirement: weed-breached

rows of summer berries, snap-beans,
squash, and plum-tomatoes;

a pear-tree in the corner dangles just
beyond the edges of his vision.

*When we were young we drove them
from the land. It welcomed us.
It took us in...*

My grandmother says: “Should be rain
today,” though the sky stands clear.

Sugared water lures the hummingbirds
to plastic feeders, hung from the porch.

An East Texas heat glimmers on the grey
stone slab.

*Then, our brothers went to war,
but we remained—to hold this ground, to turn it
to our need...*

Motes from the cottonwood descend
outside the glass frame

of his contracted sphere, timed by the hopeless
hizz of cicadas.

The dry ground gathers moisture
to itself; wraps the lost, decaying pears

in dirt and drives the chastened birds
to rest.

*Once, we would not stand for this,
would not abide; insatiable landscape
risen against us.*

Sabbat

She recalls the way the preacher's hands felt
as they lowered her down into the water:

firm—firmer than she had imagined—to keep her
from slipping. She went in an old woman,

and came out an old woman still, but different
in their eyes: newly-born, a child of the Lord.

She never went back there after that.

She spends her Sunday mornings here, by the lake,
threading tired eyes across the ripples to that haunt—

the Witch's Isle, they called it in her youth. Small
and weedy, with knobby cypresses clawing over the water.

She tried to swim there once, but the currents threw her
back to shore like a severed branch.

Her father wept when he punished her.

Now too frail to swim, she watches from the planks
of a rickety wooden pier, grey and weathered

by the wind. She prays, sometimes, that a passing
fisherman, or an abandoned raft, might ferry her still

to that place she meant to visit; maybe leave her
with just a blanket and a candle, and a firm stick

to wave across the water at a drowning girl.

Beach Boulevard/Hwy 90

The sky clears from white to mottled blue between Bay St. Louis and Biloxi, and I see the waters of the gulf for the first time under a lucid morning sun. It's already hot, but even so small bands of bathers speckle the bright sand, so white it hurts my eyes. Where they come from is a problem—there aren't enough cars, and the other side of the highway is almost bare of houses. Dead-end driveways point to empty lots or billboards advertising new developments—sleek new condos or rebuilt mansions, replicas of those that once owned the view. I turn off the radio so I can hear the waves, but the cold white noise of the air-conditioner and the road under my car drown them out. Through the windshield, I watch the people pass, muted and flickering, like an old home-movie.

I stop near Long Beach to visit the Friendship Oak, because it was the only sight my buddy Jonathan could think to recommend along my way. It's survived five-hundred years of hurricanes and battles, waves of building and destruction, the ravages of college girls and young soldiers. Beneath it, I find an old woman rooting among the dirt and leaves for acorns. She draws each one up to her ear and shakes it to see if it still holds a live nut. She helps me find a few good ones and tells me to take them home and plant them, not too close together. Her daughter and grandsons stand nearby taking pictures of each other framed by massive limbs that dip so close to the ground that they seem to rise up from it. The others don't speak to me, but a sign nearby tells us that because we stood in the shadow of the ancient tree, we will be friends forever.

Back on the road, I'm feeling hungry. Hot wind from the gulf blows sand across my windshield, and I wonder now if I should turn back toward the interstate. But approaching Gulfport there are scatterings of brightly-colored beach-huts, busy piers, and roadside seafood joints on stilts. More people are streaming over crosswalks toward the water, towels and beach-balls in their hands, some carrying children whose feet might blister on the searing pavement. I'm tempted to stop again and wade out over the sand with them, to wait by the water. I get the sense they wouldn't mind another body lolling beside them while the tide creeps in. But I pass on through, and remain on the boulevard a little further. Near Biloxi, I will stop to eat oysters and crackers at a little shack, scooping the cold shells into my hand, one by one, and chewing them quietly at an empty bar—savoring the briny aftertaste of each small life.
