



fountainstreet

jazno francoeur

commentary by robert l. francoeur



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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY FATHER, WHO FIRST INTRODUCED ME TO  
POETRY, AND TO MY MOTHER, WHO TAUGHT ME TO LOVE WORDS.

*edited by* Rush Rankin *and* Steven McElveen

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*Every effective poem has to maintain a state  
of tension between assertion and humility, the  
mundane and the grand, the specific and the  
general, the explicit and the suggestive.*

— Rush Rankin

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home

## HOME

Our life was an accident, the flames were conjured  
by an indifferent couple.

So much time has passed, their union  
dissipated with the dumb carcass of our home.

This house has been all of our houses—  
our parents colluded with emptiness to conceal this fact.

We live from cairn to cairn, burning refugee hearts,  
each mistake receding in the rear-view mirror,

each incipient disaster breaking the night  
like headlights falling on a new city.

FOUNTAIN STREET

there is a large hand unfolding  
above me, discreetly

it conceals a black man  
surrounded by a thin tincture of green  
like the moon eclipsing the sun

I am to give obeisance to him  
and his firm brothers lurking in the garden—  
they strip me of my childhood casually  
with the relative calm of a standard play,  
the rising action, apex, and dénouement

in the formation of sleepwalkers  
they withdraw silently into the past

*commentary:*

*no one can explain why they came  
to shape the hidden aquifers of your life,  
but it is here, on Fountain Street,  
where you first stepped out of the unseen*

## CATHEXIS

upstairs, my uncle relived his boyhood,  
looking from the garret window  
to the tree he had been tied to  
and into the corners of the yard  
where his impulses formed

he drove us to the pond  
by the frozen reservoir—  
my brother became pallid  
as animals do when divining pain,  
and we clambered out of the cab toward him

we undressed in a snowbank  
waiting for him to break the ice—  
he circled around, motioning to me

I conjoined with his hammer  
poised over the immutable sheen,  
though I was only a boy  
and could barely anticipate  
the future blows of initiation and affection

*commentary:*

*affection between men  
has always been  
circumscribed by pain*

*here, in the balance  
between love and brutality  
lies the origin of sport,  
the first act  
of civilization*

FEMME INSPIRATRICE

she waited under the stairs  
in the basement where I learned  
to feel and see without the advantages of light

she held me tightly to the ground and I complied  
with the conspicuous duties  
she created for me

I drifted to her daily, down the damp steps  
and found a love in her remorse  
that I could not find in myself

there she lay in the old air, suspended  
in the dark webs under the stairs  
whispering to me  
when I slept, and pleasing me

## THE INEVITABLE

a man runs in the rain  
toward this small house

the window clouds up from his breath  
even though he is a mile away

his silhouette begins to blot out the moon,  
beads of water race down the glass

he will exact something from me, I can tell  
as he slips down the hill, muscles tensed

DESIRE

it begins in childhood  
with an awkward moment  
behind the house  
then shatters outward, exploding  
into adulthood

here one collects fragments  
and reconstructs the face  
of the large boy who touched you  
but the eyes are always missing—  
only the lips remain,  
directing you downward

## INFIDELITY

a large dog fills up the backyard,  
the children are afraid  
to leave the house

each night, the dog inhales  
and exhales,  
its muscles contract against the walls

the dog's warm breath fills the attic  
as its teeth push slowly  
through the ceiling

the room dims,  
the lining of its black lips  
slides gradually over the windows

1974

I.

in the attic, a plank extended  
between the crossbeams  
over the living room ceiling  
to the room built by your father

women followed him there  
then departed hours later  
down the ladder recessed into the wall

one night his leg  
burst through the ceiling  
then snaked back through the hole

II.

your mother is busy  
in the next room  
with her new lover

you watch the changing colors  
of your father's injury  
as he sleeps on the couch

## THE SPELL

my mother used to compel me  
with her distance  
it was a diffident spell  
that made me imagine  
we were connected

but the vagaries of haunted girls  
look unhealthy in women  
and harden into caricature  
in old age

CHERRYVALE

I place my ear  
against the glass

the cicadas are chirring,  
there is a light breeze

a dust cloud forms on the horizon  
lit up by headlights

the engine  
rumbles closer

gravel knocks against the underbelly,  
wheels turn toward my room

a door creaks, a stranger materializes  
into mother with each footstep

my body folds  
into her long blue coat

## ICE BREAKING

I cross the wires where the hairs rest  
on the red barbs. Her scent lingers in the air.  
My hatchet mirrors the round moon momentarily  
as I swing it above me to split the thick sheet of ice.

Behind a tree, she watches the water  
rise and collect in a small pocket.  
Her hips shift, then she descends  
down the white embankment toward me.

## LEADVILLE

there is a corner where I choose to sleep  
where the low ceiling slants  
and meets above the supports

the walls are porous, I hear your pulse beat  
and feel the moisture  
gather about your hands

I never see you descend into the ground,  
I can only imagine the stillness  
of the tunnels, the lack of sound

*commentary:*

*don't stay too long in Leadville,  
move on to the campfire  
where we huddled together  
like some ancient tribe  
learning the power of stories  
to stave away the night*

*tell the story again  
but this time remember  
that it is only another town  
where the blood drying  
on the rocks  
is your own*

## GRANDFATHER

the crossbeam creaks  
when grandmother cries,  
the floorboards muffle  
the drunken rage  
of her husband

she rocks steadily above him  
in the master bedroom  
with two generations of boys  
in her lap

they are all men now  
and each has taken his turn  
hauling the sad figure  
up the stairs

*commentary:*

*I have also seen  
this inner structure  
of ancestral bonds,  
each fiber having the color of pain  
passing between father and son  
and on through to grandsons*

*I understand that it is whole  
that it is pure  
that I lose this view when I am in it,  
pulling against the weight  
of this old man's body  
that I am carrying*

## ORACLE

### I.

we've run together for days,  
the poles chafing our shoulders—  
we've had no choice  
but to champion our mother  
over the dirt path  
toward the stone house

the road is narrowing  
as the weeds rush by  
snapping in the spokes—  
run faster, the wheels are turning  
the secret from her  
and the sun is scorching our backs

### II.

contrary to legend, the brothers  
never died from exhaustion  
nor from Apollo's quixotic mercy  
but they did sleep well for two nights  
as their mother rambled on in the dark

they left Delphi crestfallen  
and slumped into the harness on the third morning,  
glanced at the mumbling woman  
and headed back to the farm

*commentary:*

*looking northwest from the farm  
you can see where  
in another age  
the edge of a glacier  
left a row of rocks  
arrayed in a frozen line  
still marching south.*

*looking to the east  
you can still find the place  
where a train of oxen-drawn Conestogas  
stopped long enough  
for my great-grandmother  
to be born.*



> the beginning <  
of a scene



THE BEGINNING OF A SCENE

her wan smile rejects you,  
around it, the wind occurs—  
somewhere else, on another porch  
this night is not so particular

tell yourself that nature  
has no motives or conceits,  
that her hair only suggests  
the shape of the wind,  
that her eyes do little else  
than reflect the heavens

## LOCUST STREET

Shadows press into the ground,  
the black trees lay flat  
against the clouds;  
jackdaws arc above the rooftops  
then push into the wind  
toward the highest branches;  
a boy whirls around a tree,  
emulating their startled flight,  
then ambles toward his brothers by the lake.

One by one, the windows light up  
as the elders lean toward the street—  
their boys grow in the darkness,  
appearing larger in silhouette each year  
as they round the corner.

## APPALACHIA

In the rhododendrons, something stirs.  
Tar paper shacks on the black slope  
lean in the direction of the wind.  
The dogs tense and bristle their coats,  
their master adjusts his head lamp.

Their orange hair quivers  
as they bay into the valley.  
A pine tree bends with the weight  
of some invisible animal  
scaling the branches.

The grass moves at the edge of the field  
in waves and small eddies,  
then stops, then begins  
as the dogs collect their senses  
beneath the brush.

The moon passes by a long cloud,  
then rolls into the darkness.  
The ground shudders,  
a constellation of headlamps  
defines the body of the forest.

## VISITATION

the grey arms  
define the impressions  
of gravity,

her body  
presses into  
his suit

like a child  
face down  
in the sand

but instead  
of water pouring  
into the mold

imagine space  
pushing the cloth  
into its grey valleys—

the bottom of the ocean  
is lighter than  
this room—

the grey arms  
reach for  
something

a strand of smoke  
slips from a pair of lips,  
drifts to the floor

a pearl necklace  
falling into  
the water

## UNDERSTANDING THE ANCIENTS

An airplane buzzed overhead,  
a dozen or so seagulls  
pecked around my feet,  
a man wearing a turban skated by—  
and for one moment  
you seemed to converge with all of it.

PALIMPSEST

a woman slips through the long cattails  
then pushes off from the bank  
towards the center of the pond

she sinks into the water  
as her pale suggestion echoes outward  
on the edge of the ripples

the stars realign quickly  
on the surface of the pond  
as if the evening had not been disturbed  
by her body, even for a moment

*commentary:*

*an image on the surface,  
a woman's body  
piercing through it  
only to be swallowed up  
by the order of things*

*should her act  
engrave a story on the water  
or is it better to pass  
through the wind like a bird  
leaving no trace  
of ever having been here*



> sympathetic <  
magic



## SYMPATHETIC MAGIC

America, forgive  
this apostrophe, I'm  
channeling Whitman—  
he says his atoms  
are rushing into the veins  
of the new revolution,  
he's assimilating  
into phosphor dots, trying  
to form a sincere face,  
he's easing through  
our labyrinth with a new heart,  
pulsing in the cursors  
in a remote chatbox on the eve  
of the apocalypse—  
the future is pixellating  
into his beard, he is  
singing:

*a million Trojan horses  
are circling the skies—  
beware the dark dreams  
spinning above you*

## ST. CATHERINE'S HEAD

the church is my reliquary,  
a temenos of bronze and glass—  
the old men preserved me,  
separated my head from my body  
then suspended it in the wall—  
they don their vestments  
in the old sacristy  
and sing in the great hall,  
bearing the heart of Our Lord  
as they pass by my window

of all the secrets  
I hold most dear:  
the martyrs were perfect  
only in death—  
each passing was unique,  
contrived by their executioners  
and made palatable  
by the faithful—  
even now my fellow saints  
peer out from their canvases  
and tapestries  
with a passivity  
that belies their pain

CHANT

the acolytes stooped over  
the smooth ornamental carafes  
on the low table

a succoring child blessed my lips,  
poured the choice wine  
and chanted, sotto voce:

*hair of the dog, hair of the dog, hosanna*

## EPIPHANY

five toilet paper rolls  
on the plunger handle,  
a primitive stupa,  
a lingam and yoni,  
the ithyphallic Siva  
sits cross-legged  
like me, reading a magazine,  
looking at five toilet paper rolls  
on the plunger handle

## THE FIRST COMING

Laocoön is still looking up sadly  
before his own devouring,  
wondering if this immense snake  
fell from an emasculated god.

Before antiquity, gods shook  
the columns of their temples,  
the marble cracking through the clouds  
like thunder, a dress rehearsal  
before the bugging of Ganymede.

With indolent grins  
they allowed the snake to writhe  
in a leafy copse,  
a tendril rising with the moon  
licking at its canopy  
until the first woman  
could be born.

IPSISSIMA VERBA

the rough beast does not slouch,  
he walks erect while speaking  
at small rotary club luncheons  
or on late-night public access channels,  
expounding on man's dominion over man

he's pudgy and unassuming,  
hardly a feral child brimming  
with preternatural powers—  
yet he's been cultivating his charm  
since the advent of sin,  
he moves incognito, a grass roots antichrist,  
the man behind the man  
who never reads Yeats

the world won't end with a whimper,  
but with a conference call—  
he'll pull over at a rest stop outside Albuquerque  
with his wireless remote  
to organize the endgame from a bathroom stall

CAMILLE PAGLIA  
EDITS ON THE BEACH

first draft—Tuesday, 3:00 p.m., New Smyrna:

The mermaids are swinging  
their butt-thonged bottoms  
beach to beach,  
*(do I dare to eat a peach? Ha!)*  
they can't sense the horror  
of the water, the sun,  
the leering boys with hard-ons  
*(jejeune... "leering priapistic boys" sounds more poetic)*  
who swagger like strangers  
with guns, blasting music into the sun,  
*(Camus reference may be too oblique)*  
striking poses worthy of Polyclitus.  
*(remember to look at Praxiteles, just for comparison's sake)*

A group of well-oiled girls *(yes!)*  
toss a ball over the net,  
a network of tan limbs  
and plump suburban insouciance  
*(connect this somehow to the Marquis de Sade)*  
thoroughly unaware of the forces  
bubbling quietly under my umbrella.  
*("chthonian forces" may be more to the point)*

O FELIX CULPA

She will arrive when the last building collapses  
and the corporeal fires flicker into the evening,  
when the wind collects bits of ash  
and makes the tips of the blackened fields glow.  
She will arrive intemperate and invisible,  
ready to inter her breath in the broken houses of men.

She has been here since words were realized  
and gods were employed to enforce them,  
holding the course of temples and water,  
steadying the trees as they gripped the earth  
with their knotted hands,  
sleeping in the white sails of man's first conquest.

*commentary:*

*Something waits to take control  
of buildings, bodies:*

*Trishna no longer disguised,  
nature red in tooth and claw.*

*Now we know the reason for metaphysics:  
the holy trophy wrapped between the sheets was a virgin.*



**bodies**



## BODIES

I am a liar,  
you circle me  
twice, I am  
about to tell you  
how guilty I am

I want you  
to be someone else,  
to tell me this desire  
is original

we cannot otherwise  
part, the flashing lights  
occasionally reveal  
the impressions  
I was born with

I'll cut to the quick:  
the lights are coming on  
and I'm afraid I won't  
love you then

## THE KISS

your ebony cats glide toward us in tandem—  
you part your hair and lean over me  
on my side of the bed

we kiss, but I'm almost afraid to touch you,  
the truth may speak itself unwittingly  
as I draw the sheet taut  
against the length of my body

## TOUCH

the body ferries your spirit,  
disconnected as a dream  
from its birthing place

the space beyond the womb  
is untenable, every moment  
accrues strangely into age  
as touch is slowly relieved from you

LAMENT IN THREE COLORS

when my heart becomes as vivid  
as your apples and geraniums  
you must promise to paint it—  
the north light will pour through the window  
into my palms, and be gone

## LIGHT

the blinds divide  
the blue sun,  
your blond hairs glisten  
on your uncovered leg

light bends around us  
like fabric—  
at breakfast I explain:  
the peculiarities of light,  
our bodies mapped  
perfectly by chance

## PREDICTION

just over that dune,  
that's where you'll meet her,  
she'll have fair skin  
and will be sunning by the shore

the edge of the ocean will tangent  
the brim of her hat,  
you'll make some abstruse comment,  
how it flattens space  
and makes it appear  
she and the water are touching

TWELVE HOURS IN THE FUTURE

you drink sake  
and walk down white roads  
too small to contain  
your ambition

the moon is remote,  
drifting through the branches,  
the thing in itself  
unaware of the man  
yelling at it

## SURRENDER

The spilled wine spreads to the edge of my napkin  
over the course of our dinner. After the second bottle,

I confess that my wife has thirteen ribs.

On the third bottle, we compare traumas.

The gay waiter interrupts

with the indifference of a Greek chorus:

*our most popular sin is the chocolate soufflé.*

An hour later, my red napkin could pass  
for a thin sheet of venison tartar.

The waiter pours two flutes of Kir Royal

then impatiently stacks the chairs behind us.

You lean back as if you were Isaac

anticipating his father's judgement

and we are both in that drunken, beatific state

that makes any room sacred.

ONE METAPHOR

twenty winters from now  
you'll still be divining  
profundities from copulation  
and I'll still be mining  
my family secrets  
for that one metaphor  
that will inexplicably  
explain my childhood

there's so little poetry in the reality  
that we can't write our failings  
into a good life, or be thankful  
our compulsions move us  
any closer toward truth

in Japan, a bird alights on a branch  
outside your window  
and inspires a hundred tankas  
or it simply wings  
over your house, unnoticed