

DISTURBED

1

The genesis of all that rocks the waves
so that the character of flotsam in their curls
when found at surf side
is examined in curiosity and not wonder
 becoming the way of it
those lost chances for the vision
that precedes understanding
so that light coughing in public galleries
where quiet background music is Chopin
while a fog in the civilized head
calls for quiet appreciations
as turbulent oceans on canvases
in elaborate frames
hide their genesis.

2

He remembers the house on the hill
where quiet background music is Chopin
and he is once again in shorts and halter
while mother touches his brow
over and over again
so that he shivers in pleasure and the annoyance
that precedes understanding
as food turns foul in the mouth
where a boy stands in pajamas
ready for bed and aloneness
but for his chicken and rabbit
while the bell in the toy church
rings out death
over and over again.

3

The sea-side marshes are flooded
over and over again
as the oceans deposit their ships' wealth
among weeds and flowers
where fish now struggle in fresh water
and sunset rings out death in the voices
of remaining gulls
who head for their meals or nesting
 while among the living
the dead rise up accusingly in memory
in night's shadows in lamp light
and guilt foolishly comes to roost
as food turns foul in the mouth
of those who feed upon death.

4

But now the mother is dead
and he is forty-three
in night's shadows in lamp light
whereupon a table holds his whiskey
that he might be oiled for reading
these books of those who feed upon death
in a history before his own
while among the living
politics rages
and there is no power in those
caught up in the maelstrom
as the dead rock in somebody's paradise
while hell is only a vague promise in
books as he raises his glass.

5

Caught up in the maelstrom
and white clouds hung low
over the bay's unshadowed majesty
the bait fish rose turbulent to the surface
in futile escape from the death below
while gulls squawked in the air
announcing death's presence
a feast for the fishermen who
 in this sad half natural cycle
gathered on waves in aggressive circles
again and again in view
of that house on the hill now vacant
as the sea held sway as witness
in a history before his own.

6

In futile escape from the death below
there are turbulent explorations
 and wet hair under his arms
in Chet Baker's honey in the livingroom
where there are surf-stones
numbered and dated
in artistic piles that are sea tossed
and a messy abstract hung on the wall
in this sad half natural cycle
their juicy pleasures
and he knows she has him
 locked away from his taste
as clay animals strut on the mantle
and a shorn Poodle licks away at his toes.

7

Numbered and dated
the ships march out across the Atlantic
invisible beyond sight from the yearning shore
where there are surf-stones
and the mysteries inside the ships
are sea tossed
and mystery is memory
as much as the shuffling cargo
is scuttling towards its own future
while this drama's story
might reach out and touch the ships
even as the sea-side watchers
picnic or lie in the sun
and take delight in the empty waves.

8

This is about a man who returns
to the beach of his childhood at sixty-seven
where there are numbered stones
 scattered in the sand
and the vacant house on the hill
is the dead past
and about a confusion of papers
on a desk where he spends his life
in the construction of other lives
 so that all else becomes illusion
and he might think of the grave yard
as he imagines his mother
in the house on the hill above
gazing at the sea through windows.

9

And behind his mother's face
is the face of the wife that has joined her
so that all else becomes illusion
as he whittles away at the days
a glass of bourbon
among the scatter of papers on the desk
where time meanders
in the construction of other lives
while the body confronts its slow collapse
and he can hardly rise to reach his pencil
though he is strong enough
to confront his reading
and the confusion of dead characters
in the book beside the bourbon.

10

And in the book a man travels
into various tortured circumstances
 sets off to sail upon a distant sea
and discovers the rotting cargo
where time meanders
while paragraphs are both repeated
and created in his mind
at the edge of sleep
so that all else becomes illusion
and the cargo in his head
becomes the story
of loss and pathological longing
that lingers in the sleeper's imagination
as the book ridicules the reader.

11

And yet he is forced to the stories
that he has created
and the ones still to be brought
to a kind of life that is not life
though in time there will be an ending
and the cargo in the head will rot
as the story teller becomes the story
of loss and pathological longing
but for the bourbon
that sits among papers
and brings an appropriate dullness
to the one who is dealing in machination
as the desk is facing the window
through which the sea is unconcerned.

12

Once again the sea confronts the story
with disregard
as the sailor unfurls his canvas
upon which no words are written
and the bluefish school
at the ankles of the oyster picker
and the surf licks the toes
of the beautiful maidens
while far out and beyond vision
whales breach and blow
in those hours of the day
when the sea is placid
and holds their massive bodies
gently caressing them.

13

And so does he come to be eighty
and becomes the story
of a teller of limited ability
who nevertheless tells his stories
here on the Cape in May and sunlight
 where silence is a reminder
that the time is short
and all the while I am leaving
my bed at 4 am
drinking coffee and remembering
that I love that past
in which I meet my people once again
admire their power in the memory
and write about them.

14

The sea is calm tonight
as seen from his window
and there are soft lights in fog
in the town out at the hook
 and people might be dancing there
or sitting at restaurant table
overlooking the placid waters
while house lights blink
along the curve of shore
and motors on the highway are trivial
as the fenders are still
at the gunwales of boats at the dock
yet the distance between us as always
is the wild uninterested sea.

I DON'T KNOW

1

Shovels scrape on the sidewalks
while it's still snowing
 and wind is blowing the drifts
back over the cleared spaces
to again institute that silence provided
in winter when snowy weather
covers all the sins of frustrated cracked streets
that are evidence of a government
without will or money
and I don't know
what to make of my life these days
when care is delivered
 in mail and recorded phone calls
without a human face.

2

Don't mean to be silly
 when care is delivered
up in the voice of a women who says
I'm Inder then bla bla
may I help you then helps you
 so you see while on hold
the way the sun throws lacy shadows
on that massive building that sits back
over the cleared spaces
 that once housed workers
and machines and progress but
I don't know
because there is the sun
and Inder saying may I help you.

3

The way the sun throws lacy shadows
through the trees and dresses up my dress
with geometric patterns

I can't read is the point actually
though I can see
the eyes of men standing
around looking at me
and can read the future
in which the looking becomes mutual
and respectful and

I don't know
but that a purchase on the real life
so you see while on hold
there is no other important goal
and won't give it more time.

4

Swim suits that look like saucy underwear
and men outfitted in skimpy shorts
with geometric patterns
and pockets
as protection for their delicates
lest they become an embarrassment
of a kind never examined
and won't give it more time

so that I don't know
what to make of a life spent
in attraction on beaches in nothing
but exotic clothing
and wishes for romantic adventure
while gulls mate at the shore.

5

So that a voice speaks out of places
that are sea churned or forest enabled
 or maybe in recognition
of a kind never examined
that there is only place
and pockets
of talk in a real world
since I don't know
about ideas floated on nature's absence
 in the way of desire unspecified
for she who is created by the one
who imagines her figure in garments
applied like those on a paper doll
and I know about that.

6

In the way of desire unspecified
the dance keeps yearning for the dancers
 as does the empty orchestra its fiddles
or maybe it's recognition
that nothing can begin
until those with faces in phones
put down everything
and see a world beyond the ego's hold
or it could be
that nothing can be done for them
but I don't know that's true
 because the light behind their eyes
will look out in spite of them
and all will be bright in their world.

7

Or it could be
that revelers beyond their vision
 are engaged in frivolous activities as
the dance keeps yearning for the dancers
and I don't know exactly what's happening
though I do understand
that something comes next
 as did the lindy the tango and disco
but of course that doesn't say it all
for time's shadow lingers
each time the possibility threatens them
with the world
and someday not too far away
it will be skeletons dancing.

8

To the right are the believers
and to the left those locked into engagement
with the world
 though troubled in ignorance
of calculations I don't know much about
when it comes to a haunting awareness
that something comes next
for all who live on the edge
of governments and their understandings
about everything that alludes them
 as they prelude coming disaster
while those on the right believe them
and to the left is continuing fear
of the rolling thunder.

9

For all who live on the edge
where the township is not managed
 their's is poverty and freedom
from the daily babble and yet
I don't know
of their understandings
about everything that alludes them
for to be among the privileged
and thus ignorant
is solace
at the edge of somnambulism
where everything seems vaguely possible
as when the moon rises
and the magic carpet carries them away.

10

My underwear is vacant now
and that which was the lurid prize
 for everyman
is solace
as when the moon rises
and I squat upon the beach
to drain my yellow offering like any animal
but I don't know except in sisterhood
will the hammer come down on those others
who in their ignorance
have sinned without know it
 sorrow in the judgment for them
since the hammer is for those
in power and indiscriminate lust.

11

The butcher cuts the meat
that bleeds upon the block
and is presented to the everyman
 for promised satiation
and that which was the lurid prize
so almost sacristan is eaten by those
who in their ignorance
 are smart and sophisticated
though I don't know
since smart is a dime a dozen
but understanding
is the coin of the year
and there is little enough of that
to fill a thimble a shot glass or an wink.

12

The years might limp along
without much understanding
 of the fly on the wall
but understanding
is a record of defeats yet
I don't know
since there is sunshine on the wall
and there is little enough of that
when the fly departs
 her absence in memory
that she is still there
as everything stops for a moment
and those who have departed are back
again under the sun.

13

Outside where I have planted
this woman's mystery garden
 as everything stops for a moment
and I don't know
if the flowers with sister names
who are Rose Jasmine and Lily
will bloom
as much as their namesakes
 in a troubled time
without much understanding
so that a nosegay perched upon my head
is given back as reckoning
and old clothing is worn in the gardening
by those who will alter the world.

14

To again institute that silence provided
so that you see while on hold
 and can read the future
of a kind never examined
that there is only place
or maybe it's recognition
that something comes next
 for all who live on the edge
of their understanding
who in their ignorance
are smart and sophisticated
and those who have departed are back
as everything stops for a moment
and this I know.

THAT WAY

The kids, my love, are drawing circles in the sand.
How simple their devices,
a stick, laughter, some imagination.

 These certain children are just.
Their circles are not.

No sand in the inland summer,
so jumping games,
something we didn't get around to,
though at times, in your presence,
I might have jumped for joy.

You are gone.
The circles have given in to the tide.
The children are gone.
There's a dear woman beside me.
She doesn't know what I'm thinking:

 summer on Bonaire.
The fruit boat in from Venezuela.
You are delighted.
That night, in our dark hut,
iguanas scratched on the tin roof.

How foolish to consider
these foolish things:
 your wedding dress in the closet,
still, after forty-nine years. A hat and a scarf,
a favored coat.
I could see you in them, wearing them all.

Yet I am not alone in my madness.
Memory: there you are
 in my silly construction,
a wooden hand and a foot,
the way, in illness, you cared for me

hand and foot.

And just walking down the street together,
side by side, not holding hands,
your awareness
of everything: fabrics, buildings and blown leaves,
all the way to the earth's rotation.
And where you stood was center

and gravity. What chance did I have?
One evening in darkness: your hair,
the tilt of your head, that little light.
You are reading, and from my vantage
you are viewed only in silhouette.

These impossible images, fixed on film
in some kind of photography
and quite dead.
Let me listen to your music,
keep you alive
that way.

On a forthright spring afternoon,
surrounded by the wonder of her flowers,
and still stunned,
it came to me:
I had not thought of you
in two long days.

Toby Olson

THE RED RIBBON

1

The red ribbon is tied in her hair,
and it celebrates her hair,
blond, a quarter inch of black at the roots,
and she thinks of the President's madness,
and that quarter inch
of the real emerging. What can she do?
He waits at the edge of the wood, and she
in her plain country shift
is ready to get rid of all thoughts of
presidents and houses and senates,
since her head is filled with congress,
and the tales of the red ribbon
are bouncing as she moves quickly toward him
in the failing sun.

2

Everybody fancies the ribbon,
it's red with gold thread
 stitched in along its borders
and there's an emblem.
Perhaps the rich will conspire,
anything to get it.
Yet it is only a ribbon and not currency
though that is the way the rich see it.
Money, money, money,
 there's nothing like it!
It's only a ribbon, and yet
it is beautiful and not precious,
but like the man said, "Business is
business, but love is bullshit."

The document is closed with a red
ribbon that the President struggles to
untie,
but then he gets it
and all in the small audience applaud.
With a flourish, he signs it
 then holds it up
turning as if it were some holy text. Then
all applaud again.
Birds chirp in the White House trees.
Chipmunks settle down
 in holes in the lawn.
Who is the first lady?
The only thing in the room
that seem real is the red ribbon.

She gave him a red ribbon
that he didn't want,
then insisted that he snake it
 through his belt loops and
tie it in the front.

This was just the beginning, for
she was foolish and insistent,
and he was her sap.

Ribbons are without power
to hold pants up,
thus does he dance away
covering his crotch.

She wont quit.

It's *her* ribbon. He's *hers*.

The red ribbon is torn from the gift
of the unknown anticipated
by the one who leans forward,
a flower in her hair
wondering what it could be,
as the giver sweats in his own
anticipation: will she like it, will she
demure?
Does it matter what the box contains?
Some say it's the thought that counts. She
is not thinking, but wishing
to like anything given by him.
There's a good deal of hesitation.
Open the damned box! he thinks.
She toys with the ribbon.

The red ribbon is only a ribbon
until it stands for something
 solidarity, the battle against disease,
blood of course and even stroke.
The red ribbon has no power,
yet it is powerful when worn by people
in certain groups, even by those
not on the barricades, but in offices,
 writing changes to various
regulations, the backbone of movements.
The official sits at his desk.
He is assaulted by paper, and the red ribbon
 dances on the heads
of the thousands
gathered for change.