

moving pianos

*for Eddie Leichtman, my step-grandfather
& founder of Leichtman Bros. Piano Movers*

I was "the kid" the bosses' nephew the boy
they sent to the bank with weekly receipts
my pockets bulged with cash checks & rolls
of coin as I walked the Spanish Harlem streets
before they became mean with junk past Israel's
bodega Ramos' record store its tinny speaker
wired above the door blasting the beautiful
sounds of Tito Puente Celia Cruz the young
Willie Colon past the corner drugstore where
a thin young man daily imagined himself Dracula
covering then uncovering his mouth with a black cape
his eyes revealing nothing on the way back
I stopped at the hot dog cart & fell in love
with the Puerto Rican girls their eyes black
as the beads of my mother's rosary their tongue
sweet as Latin

at 12 I was the office help
adding long columns of numbers in the account books
till I became fast as my uncle calculating
the sums in a small place just above my heart
I could **feel** if I was right I was the janitor
sweeping the concrete aisles between the pianos
I couldn't lift my arms thin adolescent wires
used to hours of basketball but not to music's
weight in the slow afternoons in the back
of the warehouse I'd try to lift one end
of a spinet imagining myself Murphy cigarette
dangling from a corner of his mouth laughing
at insults tossed between "the men" blue outlined
women writhing on his forearms as he raised a piano

with a slight straightening of his bent knees
then dropped his pants to prove he had eyes
tattooed on the cheeks of his ass

the next year I smoked three packs a day
& could hold my end of a Wurlitzer
I learned how to "dutch" a piano
onto the truck's tailgate throw one end onto a
canvas pad the other into the air turn & drop it
in my partner's hands slip a wooden roller under
its sliding board crouch at the low end & push
I learned the ties to secure it to the truck
how to pad where to place the wooden chocks
to save the legs how to take it up stairs
around corners through doorways made for the thin
I learned how to carry a baby grand an organ
an eight-foot Steinway concert into houses
where Big Henny said "the only thing they know
how to play is the fuckin' radio"

& I learned about "the men"
Butch the shop steward who did everything
by the book & always wore a spotless uniform
of heavy cotton shirt & pants & read the racing forms
between stops Preacher who had a storefront church
in Harlem & would caution me that the men's harsh words
about one uncle were nothing but they were the truth
Russell whose solemn strength stopped the racist
jokes he was shot resting on his stoop one Friday
evening for his weekly pay Benny who lived in his
unpaid for Cadillac & always offered to balance
the keyboard when there was an upright to "hump" 4
stories Murphy who lived on the edge
whose back was a tattooed map of navy ports
& his face the path of coming disasters
who sang & played an old upright as it slid
from the back of the truck into traffic

& I learned about my uncles the bosses Howard
the career military man squeezed out
when they decided they wanted the degreed
to lead the uneducated into slaughter his motto
there was always work
& if there wasn't he would make some
moving stacks of pianos from one side of the warehouse
to the other in the heat which covered us
like dusty burlap & George my uncle of the big heart
the one they'd ask for an advance a day off some time
to get things straight who'd buy beers
on hot Friday afternoons & send the men home
early whose heart burst from too much
smoke & food & sweet times

I learned how the day could break
a man with its labor turn on him
like a dog slipping back into wildness
how fragile the back & bone hand & shoulder
how the strength of the whole can bring
down each part I learned how to be
the weight I carried to move
like the masters I learned the art of work

Charles On Wheels

in late summer before the burning
of leaves in gutters when
the smell of hot tar popped
into air & nuns
who ordered the other three
seasons of our lives still
slept inside ivied convent walls & priests
were seen on faraway beaches in Aloha shirts & sneakers
Charles On Wheels his moustache trimmed
like Don Ameche's slowly
drove his black panel truck through
the streets a mobile fruit
& vegetable stand sweet
peaches apples
oranges tomatoes cool
green heads of lettuce all
laid out in rows like a flag
from a land beyond
our block where overalled
farmers joined hands
with their families & bowed
to the American cornucopia Charles
On Wheels an envoy from a garden
more fruitful than Eden would give
the children fat
plums purple
teardrops of pleasure & we would
cry "Charles Charles the summer
is running from us we've heard
the nuns' habits stirring" & Charles would honk
from the end of the block a black
sun at the end
 of the long
 last days
 of summer

this American life

for my grandmother

in spring my grandmother sewed dresses
three for my sisters three for my cousins
a skill she learned a young girl emerging
from steerage into New York's sweating
garment shops at the end of a grinding century
pins in mouth she draped the girls in organdy
taffeta chiffon & crinoline
marked & cut the cloth & for weeks worked
her needle by hand & treadle
Easter morning my sisters like little
pastel blue and yellow bubbles bobbed
down the hall to the floor length
mirror on the bathroom door twisting
their necks to see what others would see
walking behind them

one spring my grandmother took me
the only boy to buy my Easter clothes
she wore her flowered dress and sturdy shoes
the same way she dressed thirty years before in a photograph
my grandmother her three sons & her mother
on a picnic by the bay in the Bronx
at the end of the streetcar line
I wore my good shoes good pants good jacket
we rode the elevated through Queens
the conductor announcing each stop in an indecipherable mumble
the train squealing around curves
descending beneath the East River to Grand Central
then a double decked bus to Macy's where we ate
hot dogs sauerkraut a piece of apple pie I was surprised
this year I wouldn't be a little man in a little gray suit
with a little fedora

she let me pick a chocolate sports coat flecks
of red woven into the fabric bluegray
pants brown loafers & a skinny maroon tie
a harbinger of my teenage quest for cool

I didn't know my grandmother
was a fatherless girl who sailed from poverty
to poverty & had three husbands
the first disappeared after a daughter's stillborn birth
the second my grandfather one of eleven children
his father an immigrant stone cutter who carved a life
out of New York's produce markets & moved his family uptown
maybe this son was her safe port they divorced
because he lost his job or he drank
or joined a union or maybe her mother's constant
whispers "you can do better" cast her adrift she ran
a boarding house cooked cleaned laundered
at night did piecework with her needles
at times fled one place for another when the rent came due
the third an older Jewish man from the neighborhood
had a steady business a wife & five children he left
for my grandmother & her three sons
he smoked cigars she cooked they played cards

when she died at 93 my mother sent a photograph
my grandmother in her flowered dress & sturdy shoes
smiling by the African violet I gave her when I left
the city for the West
& a note to her grandchildren
how she loved her sons
how our parents loved us
& we should honor them
how she prayed each night God might forgive
her youthful sins her sins of surviving
His gift of this
American life

mowing

I know the time
for first mowing
I've learned
the subtle swale
how different grasses respond
to the blades how low
to duck beneath the oak to save
my scalp how to balance
my weight to cut sidehill
how to brake to descend the steep
slope every year something new
an unfamiliar grass a volunteer
oak emerging from a blackberry
tangle or what
is new are small
places my dog is first to find as she grows
old the warm
in early spring the cool
in summer
& as I watch
the hawks the crows the jays the flicker
who comes the last two days
to feast on ants in the rotting
wood bounding the garden beds my body
slows becomes one
more changing
constant
in this place
I call
home

anthem

five crows row the sky
join three others hovering
above a stand of fir ferociously
cawing one
then another
drops into the upper branches
till a hawk screams out
catches a draft
& ascends
a jay riding its ear

for a moment they're an avian
flag the hawk
a sun orbited from above
& below by eight black
feathered planets the jay a small
blue star busily fluttering against a blue
field they fill with wild
cacophony a fierce
anthem

o say
did you see
that brave jay
eight steady crows
that hawk soaring its red
tail in day's true
light

gleaming

coffee

grade school mornings I woke
to my mother downstairs
at the mottled gray kitchen table alone
with her coffee waiting
for my sisters & me to come down
pour our cereal into plastic
bowls down it
with milk & sugar our father
asleep until we left

I don't know if my mother drank
another cup before he came down
or maybe a third with him
I loved its aroma but not
its taste

the last time I sat alone
with my mother she was drinking a cup
in the kitchen of the apartment
my parents moved to the summer I left
& they sold the house
& gave away my childhood
trains comics & shoeboxes
of baseball cards

she had talked to the young parish priest
he assured her I would come back
to the Holy Mother the Church I was silent
waiting for her to change
the subject tell me
who had died who had married
how she & my father were moving to Florida
when my youngest sister left
for college

I didn't visit often
avoiding arguments with my father
about religion Vietnam Civil Rights
my father a self-made lawyer built his case
with classic logic I countered with stories
songs & poems the volume rising
till silenced by our angry shouts

my mother coming to me after whispering
your father loves you

I never went back to that mother the Church
I moved & found faith in a small piece of land
the songlines of its trees
stones plants soil its birds fluttering
back & forth between tangles of rosemary
& hanging seed feeders the deer grazing
on fallen crab apples
the squirrels burying acorns
in winter's tired gardens

now in my 70's I take a pen a notebook & drive
to a downtown bakery a few times
a week order a pastry
something savory sometimes sweet
& a cup of coffee brewed fresh splashed
with cream to ease my tongue give me time
to unknot the bitterness understand the lonely
quietude of its taste