

Overdrive

Selected Poems

A. McA. Miller

From Terra Ceia, a Good Morning for Marie

That semi's right-rear tire blew out
and slung half-moons of corrugated
tread. Then, did I dodge? You bet.
My old black Volvo cut fat creases
in the road.

Thanks for your call.

That set it straight, across two thousand
miles of wire. You love your husband
still. That's still OK.

Last night it rained.

Our brick walk's orange as a full long mirror.
Across the six-lane, diesels rumble.
How I miss you. Stupid, no?
Put that another way, you'd say.

Try this: what goes down must come up.

Concrete crushed my boy in '70.
Last week, in the dark of *Apollo 13*,
my big son wept for that same year
his brother died, the year that you
turned five. We'd watched his space-shot rise
like a wavy metal soul. I didn't cry.
I choked it down like a big dry biscuit.

What goes down shifts around. It quivers.

In this big cool house, I'm first awake.
It's the only time to say: I miss you
lots. No shit. That's it, I guess. The gist
of this. If I had your gift of perfect pitch,
I'd hear the icebox moan its one low C.

Always something doesn't fit: before

high radar mapped it all, Mercator
showed gray spaces in the world.
Absence held the map together.
It still does.

You tell the kids

the land is not to own, but love—
if so, how come so many Brits and Blacks
died trekking up the double Niles?

Ptomaine, malaria, heat stroke, scurvy—
and all for blue and white meanders
on their maps.

Conrad went up for ivory,
sure; but that's not old Jim Bruce,
or even Speake and Burton, headed for
Lakes Tana, Tanganyika, and the queen
of white, Victoria. Why? The love
of danger? The danger, maybe,
of love. Could be that's why you write,
and stash my letters in a secret file.

The more we talk, the less I know.
Is that the trick?

Blood explores our bodies
or we die. The Brits found Lake Victoria.
Two Niles came sluicing from the Mountains
of the Moon! It took a century for glory
to go sour. Oh, little town of Kasensero
filovirus, HIV, Ebola.

A century is more than we have left.

The more we talk, the less I know.
What goes down snakes on up: Apollo
shot through clouds spun from the Nile.
My son turned ash and dirt, such land
is not to own. Please, call me back?
It's time to wake the kids.

Love,
Jack

Amniocentesis, for Aimée

The normal human eye rolls firm
with jelly, shaped to keep the pressure in.
This CRT curves out, another cool green
eye, as if it watched us
watch it. Inside, there's vacuum
soft enough. Electrons wander.
Watch it.

Simple as your eye's soft curve
toward iris, the flat shape on the tube
curls up. Its hands and feet flip out:
it moves. It has no neck. No sex
except the basic thrust of spine in fluid.

Five shots of Novocain, your belly's ready
for the needle. The Doctor's trick is
shove it in the fluid, not the child.
The picture shifts.

All done. It drifts.

It kicks its thick placental
water bed.

The picture blurs.
The basic shape of skull
is all we see.

Three weeks from now,
the quickest cells will culture. What's
the damage? Will you keep it—blurred
like us, and spindled by a thin
bone shadow?

Prince Apep, upon Serket

*Her place of burial
has not been found*

My sister the scorpion
whose sting closes the throat
whose sting opens the throat,
 my goddess of easy breathing,
our bellies twisted as we fought
until Ra rose, until I knew
my enemy.

Ra knew how to stiffen trees
that summer. And you, too brown
and rigid at attention, paused
like sculpture, on your back.

In that ceremonial sun,
I fondled your small blunt edges,
and centered on your body
as the wide sand cooled.

I buried you slow: in a rush of white
sand running its gauze down your legs,
a thick comb through your hair,
my fingers full of cloth and wet.

It is still here, that dark blunt feel.
It is as sure as wood. I feel for you
 my sister, my curse
down there, blocked up and anaerobic,
fumbled full of linen in a stall.

*“ . . . love that moves the sun and the other stars.”
—Dante, Paradiso, XXXIII, 100*

for Edith Piaf

Monody: the Mariner in Orbit—

If Paris has a spindle, then you sing it:
your voice spun hard applause
that circled in
from the rim of the stage.

Straight in the light, you were tar
on silver. Black musk steamed
off your shoulders then.
Your spotlights were a space to cruise.

Now it's a new affair. Your hands
are slipping, but your voice
takes hold. As dark wings of the stage
fan out, it's a long fall

into orbit. Hard vacuum sucks
the air away, and still your last song
circles in. Who'd guess the microphone's
your spindle for support?

You hook a round off Venus, crack
her chin, and swing your wide eyes on
where Mercury boils and la Tour Eiffel

curls to a solid eye of fire
you lean on. Sing. You burn
black chatter of telemetry

saying it over, saying it over:
absence is the target

Love
the sun is only its spindle.

Wide at the bending,

water runs the hull line.

Narrow ripples chortle three crisp ribs
that V the bottom of this boat.
We nose up the inlet, bouncing sunlight
over seawalls.

Now the tide has turned, a skim
of water runs through sawgrass. We turn on down-
stream, bucking headwind from the far
brown line of squalls.

The German Shepherd, silver
to his tail-tip, gallops down his seawall, hooting
from the throat. He's showing teeth. The Spaniel
runs beneath his belly, nervous, ducking her muzzle
back.

My daughter tries for flower
and daddy in one breath. The fishing bobber
fills her hand from edge to edge. White top,
red base, and the slick
black spring-tight center

hop from her hand
to the scupper; they teeter, tilt, then plunge.
Ba-Ba-the-Sheepish-Bobber's gone
again.

It gallops backward through our wake:
green nylon loops it solid. Bobber skis
the shallow waves, and glazes
over with water.

Hand after hand
she pulls the line: it bounces ripples,
jags upstream. I swing the boat on its short
axis. Bobber rides to her hands again.

Running upriver,
our backs to the squall line, I twist the buzzing throttle
with one hand.

White hairs cross my forearm, wakes
of shallow boats.

A fraction of a family, this.
This child will be my last.