

EIGHTEEN SMALL REALIST STUDIES

YOUNG SMITH

1 – 3

- An old man eats cherries and smokes cigarettes at once, filling an ashtray with filters and stones.
- A juror in a motel room reads *Ecclesiastes*.
- A taxidermist sorts through a tray of glass eyes.

4 – 5

- A butcher washes blood from the hair on his knuckles.
- A policeman on horseback chews a yellow cigar.

6 – 8

- A professor gives up on her crossword puzzle, hides it in the wastebasket under her desk.
- An actress rehearses the lines of Ophelia.
- In his dark cell, a prisoner works long equations in his head.

9 – 10

- In a department store, a night watchmen fondles the breasts of a mannequin.
- A boxer studies his urine for traces of blood.

11 – 13

- At the insistence of his father, a young man shaves his beard, then weeps over the face he finds in the mirror.
- A painter scratches the pupil from an eye on her canvas.
- An undertaker brushes the hair of a corpse.

14 – 15

- A reporter confirms the names of a children lost in a fire.
- A drunken widow cuts the tongues out of her dead husband's shoes.

16 – 18

- A bartender counts the moles on his customers' faces, writes down these numbers as his lottery picks.
- A sleepy child recites the names of the planets in Latin.
- An old woman with a lantern weeds her garden in the dark.

MOMENT ABOVE A SWIMMING POOL

August hot, like breathing velvet, while
in the deep end bowl,

silence of a woman moving under water,
strings of wavelight

pulling her curves and corners
out of true—

*a nose warped flat
an ear unmolded
bright arms wallowed
out of phase—*

while in the noon above the fencespears,
a milky north

full of crows and dragonflies, of failing
starpoints

(jets?) and lines of chimneys marched to lost
among the glare—

*past brick and angle
out of mortar and plumb
beyond the eye's
reach of naming—*

while in a magazine near the snackbar, under
a girl's smearing

thumb, words are coaxed from their stamp,
urged out

of their glossy ink and sense to press alone
in silent places—

*in the mouths of locks
under the pinch of staples
between the threads
of screws—*

until, in the plunge of the fill-line spigot,
a new voice

opens with the valve, rinsing as it comes
those torn

words loose from the hour to walk in
scattered file—

*over the veins of leaves
through the blistered grass
along a trail of drying
footprints—*

to the deep end's edge, where at last they find
that pale diver

moving under water, and where, with her bending
rock of lather

and glow, they break like spores, giving up their shapes
to the lightstrings—

*reaching over velvet
making scissored
music a calling
out of true—*

THE BEAUTY OF THE LIGHT

Light embraces the figure of a woman
lying on a chair beneath

a yellow lamp. When diffused, its rays
begin to tumble

and spin, wrapping themselves about her
shoulders and thighs.

Scattered from their single course, its lines
dissolve to a creamy film

of loops and scrolls and swirls—clinging,
in a series of gentle

gradations, from bright to dark, along her
forearms and throat.

Much of what we call the beauty of light—
like much of what we call

the beauty of the body—is only the sum
of this delicate confusion.

THE LIGHT IN D MINOR

The sun poured out its golden rhythm:
Its light was a music of double bass and French horns.

That music fell down on the roofs of our churches, and soon
the roofs of our churches were the bronze of its gongs.

The gargoyles and chimney-pots throbbed with its motions.
The sun was a drummer with parturient wrists.

It hammered its beams to the voices of choirs,
bursting the time of their angular psalms,

tangled its fire in the great pipes of the organs,
and shook open the skirts of the prayermasters' gowns.

The bell towers groaned beneath this ruckus of marvels
while their steeples, like fingers, brushed at the sky.

Until the sun, when it saw how the faithful were cowering—
though it wanted no fear for the life it would give—

turned away from those timid rites at the altars,
silenced its blessings, and dulled its bold eye.

THE LIGHT AS SILKY MOTION IN THE CONSTELLATION OF CENTAURUS

Alone in her Peruvian mountain retreat,
The aged astronomer sits on her laddered seat,

Bent toward the heavens like an heliotrope
At the end of her twelve-foot telescope,

Pulling the music that wrinkles just under her skin
From the white hairs on her aged Hegelian chin.

The astronomer has not lost her mind—
She has given it away to the sky—

And each evening at the lens of her twelve-foot eye,
She traces its journeys with lilting sighs—

Another child of the brilliant Peruvian night,
Waltzing in a gown of unruly young light.

CADAVER

In his rubber apron, the coroner
divides her body on a table.

With a flashing saw, he splits the sternum.
With the twist of a handle, he parts the ribs.

But inside her breast, he finds no heart,
no lungs, no spleen or stomach.

Instead, there is a cardboard box,
and inside the box, a book of matches.

Under the head of each match, along its paper throat,
is the name of a man whom the woman once loved.

Stripping off his gloves, the coroner strikes each match,
lets it burn through the letters of a broken past.

The smoke from these names curls blue on the ceiling—
gathers the shapes of headboards, of unborn daughters' eyes—

and as the man in the apron breathes those figures,
he is opened with the blade of a stranger's regrets.

IN THE SUICIDE'S TOP DRAWER

- thumbtacks
- shirtbuttons
- cigarette papers
- drycleaner's ticket
- daysleeper's mask
- sketch of a house on the back of a menu
- straight razor
- arrowheads
- Canadian dime
- handkerchiefs
- collar stays
- bone-handled penknife
- bar of soap from an airport motel
- hip flask
- brochure for a hunting lodge in Alaska
- whetstone
- splintered reed from a clarinet
- list of names under the heading *Customers' Children*
- list of addresses crossed through with red ink
- box of tie-pins
- box of electrical fuses
- book of trout flies
- deck of backbroken cards
- page filled with his signature in various styles
- page with columns of numbers (importance unknown)
- matchbooks
- shoehorn
- birthday card from a dentist
- photograph of a woman with snow in her hair

WHAT DOES THE OTTOMAN LONG FOR?

What is it the end tables care about?
What does the daybed believe in?
What old guilt troubles the sofa

while the cat sleeps on its arm?
Whatever the truth, the furnishings
are slow to declare it.

Though our intimates,
they keep their secrets close.
The clock seems vain,

the curtains lazy,
but who can tell
if appearances belie

their true souls?
Could the floor and the ceiling
share a platonic affection?

Or do they burn for each other
with an impossible love?
Whatever their story,

it is a private drama,
whether tragic or comic,
only the principals can know.

What do the walls hope to learn?
What does the ottoman long for?
Only they could tell us,

but since their voices are still,
of course—*wise* creatures—
they never will.

A TWIST OF BRASS, A BRIGHT WORD

(The Suicide Buys a Gun)

In the pawn shop the pawnbroker
sorts through his fat ring of keys.
With a twist of brass, he opens

a dusty showcase, where dozens
of revolvers lie on shelves of green felt.
Even under the quivering fluorescent lamps,

the mouths of the pistols are dark—
though as she lifts each in turn
to test its weight in her fingers,

the customer feels a tongue coiled
tight in its barrel—each waiting
to speak the same broken word.

AND WHAT OF THESE NEW MOUNTAINS?

Our city has become a story no one can remember.

Here, for example:

We have forgotten the names of the generals
whose statues line the square.
The marble folds of their cloaks grow dark,

then darker still in the sunshine,
until even the pigeons refuse
to rest on their shoulders.

And elsewhere:

See my sister there lost among the forest
of buildings. Where is this, she wonders,

that the morning has carried her?
Is this the city of our youth?
If so, why then do the streets seem unfamiliar?

Where are the fountains, and where are the bridges?
Why is there no river where the river ought to be?

And what of these new mountains to the west?

Whose red mountains are these, carved
tall against the sky, where often, as a girl,
she roamed through a grassy plain?

And still elsewhere:

By what path has my brother reached the house of our birth,
with its green shutters and its white-painted bricks—
though it was destroyed by bulldozers decades ago?

Why does the door open before he enters the garden gate?
And who is this couple, calling from the porch?
Are these our buried parents?

But whose eyes are these in the face of our mother?
Whose voice is this in our father's throat?

My brother cannot say. Nor can I begin to answer,
since we stand now in a city that has become
a broken story, a story which—though *why*,

even our shrewdest priests and scholars
cannot explain—it seems that none of us
should ever hope to tell again.

THOSE DREAMING OF THE DAWN WILL GO ON DREAMING IN THE DARK

Tonight we find ourselves, suddenly, trapped
in a moment that will never end.

Those sleeping now will never awaken.
Those awake will never know sleep again.

Those working in the factories will continue working in the factories.
Those digging in the mines will go on digging in the mines.

That woman sewing a button will sew her button forever.
That child reading a poem will have no other companion

but her poem, and if she does not understand
its words now, she will never understand them.

That man lighting a cigarette will be lighting
his cigarette a hundred years from now, five-hundred

years from now—though, of course, the years will no longer
be counted—and he will never cast another shadow

except for that blue shadow of his hands,
trembling on the wall as he strikes his match.

Meanwhile, the earth will grind, but will not move upon its axis.
Those dreaming of the dawn will go on dreaming in the dark.

Those whispering prayers will never cease to whisper.
And those asking themselves how such a thing should happen

will live each moment expecting a reply to this question—
which, as only you and I know now (since, alas, in all

the hours ahead, the two of us can learn no other lesson)
is an answer that will never, though must forever nearly come.

SUGGESTIONS FOR NEW COLLECTIVE NOUNS

- a fever of larkspur
- a siege of guitars
- a lather of birdsong
- a custard of stars

- a stupor of crickets
- a parlor of sighs
- a menace of windows
- a vapor of lies

- an equation of rifles
- a scabbard of pain
- a slumber of clergymen
- an opera of rain

- a quarrel of ashes
- a rumor of crows
- a pastry of kisses
- a carcass of prose