

SHERWOOD ANDERSON TOURS THE EAST VILLAGE

By

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by

Christiaan Sabatelli

For Sarah Lucy Sabatelli, my mother,
and Sabastian Sabatelli, my son.

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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This thesis is a collection of twenty-four original poems. These poems range in subject: some dealing with lineage; others with grief; some are fictions; others historical. Many of them are a combination of memory and observation.

LIGHT BEFORE THE SUN

I rise into gray light before the sun
and stare around me,
wondering if I have slept too long
or too late. The pale light of the clock
strangles everything in its color.

Before I begin
those tasks that consume the day,
I think of my son awake late past dark,
of my mother's smile as disease crumpled her.
I no longer recognize my own hands.

I know that this must be
what the last edge of life looks like,
the grainy light framing the bulk of things.
I sit, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the dark,

but there is no miracle,
only the slowly gorging light
that indicates it will soon be day.

BUTTONS

So, I'm putting new shoelaces into the shoes
I've worn for a year now,
and the laces aren't going in easy.
There's this large hole in the heel of my left sock,
and my skin shines against the gray cloth
like a golden apple at dusk.

So I get up, and I walk into Crowley's store,
shoes still in hand, and there is this fellow
yammering on to Ebenezer.
He's trying to sell buttons or something,
and I get this idea that I should scare him off.
I walk to where Ebenezer keeps his guns on display,
right by the front door.
Anyone could walk out with one.
So I grab one of the cheap revolvers from the case
and begin to wave it around.
"You get out of here," I scream at the guy.
"We don't want any collar fasteners here."
Then I realize they may think I've lost it,
or that I have something personal against this guy.
So I try to make sure they know I'm not losing it.
"I don't say I'll shoot," I tell them.
"Maybe I just took this gun out of the case to look at it.
But you better get out. Yes sir, I'll say that.
You better grab your things and get out."

Somehow I don't think they believed in my sanity.

The traveling man left, raking different colored samples
of collar fasteners off the counter into his black leather bag.
He ran. He was a small and bow-legged, so he ran funny.
His bag caught on the door and he stumbled out.
"Crazy, that's what *he* is—crazy!" he screamed
as he rose from the sidewalk.
Inside it was real quiet.
I replaced the revolver. My feet got cold,
so I sat down to put on my shoes,
I still had them in my hand.

That made it better, even without the laces.

READING TEA LEAVES

I'll die in Bangladesh,
potato farms surrounding me
the stacked hillside tangled in vines,
my hair gathering wind and rain.
In streets, motorcars and mopeds will be unaware
of my body, glittering in earthbound drops.

Having taken to reading tea leaves,
I can see the fields, the grimace of the pickers,
saturating the countless rows of green
as the water collects in their cloths.
Each cup of tea tells me more than I want to know.

I'll die in Bangladesh,
new potatoes bulking in stolons below me,
the rain making puddles of spatter-mad mud.
When the pickers return, after the rain stops
and the ground is firm under foot,
they will find my body, bathed in leaves and vines.

DOCTOR REEFY'S SELF-PORTRAIT

Do you know all the sweetness of the gnarled apples,
the slight, round bodies rejected by pickers,
that hold in one side all the sweetness of the season?

Have you forsaken the apples eaten in the city,
the bright fruit for display,
the gloss waxed on to compensate for flavor?

Do you fill your pockets with knotted fruit,
moving tree to tree before the end of the day,
ground hard underfoot with frost,
looking for the last rejected growth of the orchard?

And are you now nibbling past the skin,
finding the reluctant juice,
tasting flavor others reject,
unable to fix your mind upon the round perfect fruit?

Few have seen these bodies in the grove,
or plucked such sweetness from the tree;
few will ever hold on their tongues
the affection for this body.

LINEAGE

1 The Honeymoon

The tree fell across power lines
until the pole leaned toward the fallen tree
like an injured man, slumped, caught in his fall.
The tree, a live oak, half rotten and black,
was old enough to have sprouted the year
the *San Marcos Record* reported that my grandparents
“solemnized” their marriage.

The storm moved from San Salvador Island to Tampa,
and then into Georgia.
My grandparents traveled too, “leisurely, making stops
in New Orleans and Tampa, Florida.”
My grandparents continued on
to Key West where they boarded “a steamer for Havana
and after a few days in that city went on to Panama.”
They lived there for years among the Kuna Indians,
before the Kuna moved to San Blas Archipelago
to retain their tribal identity.
Hurricane Frances never saw Cuba or Panama,
the way my grandparents did;
it just lingered in Florida.

In the morning, there were still zealot winds.
My son and I picked up shards of wood
pulled from the pole and went inside.
We each put on dry clothes and waited
for the storm to quiet outside,
for the electric to come back on.

2 Storytelling

Tonight, in shadows above my bed,
I see bodies, hear the stories they tell each other
as they grow grotesque and dissolve.
In them the boy-body I once had shows a moment
and then fades into the flickering shapes
of two bodies coupling.

These are the movements that made my son,
and they too dissolve, their bulk mixing
to become a man I never knew,
a man who still stains my blood,
a man who raised my mother.
He is telling the story of my birth,
of how I was born early, my mother's water breaking
before I was due, the doctor afraid to leave me in.
His story trails off as a Kuna woman replaces him,
a gold ring hanging from her nose.
She is whispering to a baby all the secrets she knows are true,
she is telling him that we are all born from fear,
that we are all born too early.

WAITING

I close my eyes,
my car cooling under a sugar maple.
From here I can see the wharves
wilt into the slick river
and the sun fade into the Lincoln Tunnel
before it exits into Weehawken.
On the corner a babushka mother toddles
her girl home from school.

This is Whitman's city still,
the numberless crowded streets
and tall grass of buildings,
the sky gorged with spires,
and this side of the island is budding:
playgrounds plump with strollers,
fields lush with pigeons,
the river blackened by thaw.

I remember kissing my first girl near here,
in the elevator of the beige building
on the corner of 80th Street.
She was blonde and more experienced.
On the same corner, years later,
I waited for my father at the park entrance.
He was late and I moved away
not to live here since.

VIEW FROM BOSTON: DISBELIEF

The cold cough of the Atlantic blows
west, into Pleasure Bay.
Inland, St. Matthew the Redeemer awaits
its congregation; frost grates the gulls
catamaraning through the spires.
Across the brackish foam,
past Fort Warren Island and the hull of Cape Cod,
past Gloucester Harbor and the canyon-deep nets
of the Sohm Abyssal, the ship-steel body of the Disbelief
sits counting barnacles. The dull anger of the bell
keeps mako sharks at bay, the throated bulk
of the engine cold dark, the propeller asleep in the water.
Thick with halibut, the lower decks are littered
with sleep, the deckhouse silent as the captain plots
a path through the storm. He does not know
the calm settled days before, settled above.

SHERWOOD ANDERSON TOURS THE EAST VILLAGE

This is still the city I remember.

Over there, the woman, drunk and laughing,
scuttles out from an after-hours bar
and presses her palms hard against the smooth granite side of a bank,
then crouches and pisses on the sidewalk.

Or there, bent like a strawberry picker
looking for blushed unblemished fruit,
the frayed shape of a man
rummages through the dumpster.

And there, in the first natural light of the day,
like a team of insects, garbage men
gather the slick black plastic bags
and throw them into the hive-mouth of their truck.

Even in the buildings, where we cannot see them,
lovers wait an extra moment before uncurling
from each other, into the day.
This is the same, always the same.

MIRACLE WORKER

A block past 7th Avenue, on West 39th,
the door reads “Interior Design Brought to New Levels.”
There is swagger in the wording
that suggests the owner would tell you,
over Merlot in some brick-walled bistro,
“I turn Freudian couches into day beds,
making velvet settees match the color of anger.
There are hours when I turn bedding
into more than a place to sleep,
finding the right weaves to reveal
baldachins that conceal and entice.
I find moiré and padding to cover grasscloth.
For those who want something airy,
I use only light-colored linen.

I have a son who could learn my trade.
I watch him brush terrycloth
or wrap women in Cheviot cloth
and I see a younger version of me.
He does not want to thread his life
like mine, stitching cloth into days,
patching weeks with work.
He is like a sweater with a single loose strand,
always unraveling from the stitch of staying.
Sometimes I wish I could join him,
throw everything into his Ford F150,
the road dissolving into the next state line.
But I have clients waiting
and a reputation as a miracle worker.”

LAZARUS

After two days in the cave, Lazarus
mistook the face of his Savior
for a loaf of bread,
the hands that had raised him
for goblets.

He saw his sister Martha
weep for a man she would never wed,
craving to smell the skin of the Savior,
to feel the thorns of His beard.

Magdalene, with hennaed hair
that had dried prayers from Jesus' feet,
her hands scented of spikenard,
lips painted with calling men to bed,
was the only one Lazarus recognized.
He saw the falling away of her shoulder,
the dark coins of her nipples
through her linen dress, the tangle of hair
between her hips.

He wanted
to taste sweat of other men on her lips,
to smell beneath her hem.
He saw that to live was to sin,
that even his sisters were temptation.
In that moment, he turned
into the cave again, knowing his flesh
called for the darkness.

PENELOPE

In his mind, she is a river
brackish with rill and desire.
He thinks of her carrying the sand
that becomes the soft shore of the delta.
He thinks of her mingling with the ocean,
the salt gathering in the folds of her skin.
She is fresh water far from the sea and Ogygia.

He watches the wind that gathers in a clot
just before the curve breaks,
before the fabric snaps back to being cloth.
He tells himself the story
of how he had been kept from death,
of how he had been loved like the tide
and lulled into forgetting.

Some days, he watches the white curl
of the wind on the wine-dark waters;
and there is an echo of the way home.
He struggles, then, to remember
the fistfuls of stars that were a map,
to remember catching the curve of cloth into a sail.
Before the wind becomes a way home
he hears Calypso singing,
sees her body naked in the sun
and decides to stay another night.

TSUKASA-DAYU, A LADY OF PLEASURE

Someone calloused his hands
carving this lion's paw shell at the center of the headboard,
the single flare above the grain moving
like a breeze from right to left.
There, above, the woman in Eishosai Choki's print
wipes her neck, her gown close to falling away,
her lips too small ever to kiss a man.

Still in the darkness, arms crossed behind your head,
you hang off the bed. In the electric-green glow
of the clock, your shirt is pulled away
to reveal the stretch-marked ghosts of three children.
On the floor the cat licks his limbs,
his body stretched parallel to yours,
his guttural purr crossing the room.

My fingers hunt the lines around your ribs,
finding the texture of your skin;
your hair fans across the sheets.
I have never been married,
denying that history demands that sort of thing,
and have never touched a married body.
Your lips are the right size.

BEFORE CHARMING

She was asleep. We brothers
saw poison in the apple,
did not see blood beneath snow,
did not read eyes rippling
under dreams, did not listen
to lips whispering his name.
She waited for him to come.

HIDE AND SEEK

Gnats dance clouds
around your face
as you start to hunt
for other children hiding
between corn-stalk rows
that seem tall enough to touch clouds.
Even though you cheated,
peeking through squinted eyes
to watch where they ran,
you pass by, and they run
to the old oak-tree base.

Then you hide,
pressing your body into the ground
behind a bush.
You hardly breathe,
hoping that your heart stops
beating out of your ears.
You lie there, a stone
deep between your shoulder blades,
blades of grass itching you
like insects crawling over your skin.
You lie there,
darkness reaching out
from the tree line
and the air starts to glitter
with fireflies around you.
In the dark, you watch
clouds change
into cars and houses
and by the time you stand up
hide and seek is over.

ORCHESTRA

From silence only the coranglais, fading
as a single boy picks up the last note
still damp in our ears. His voice opening
as a second boy joins the steady sound,
they are the beginning of melody,
the birth-spring of all the notes to follow;
from them comes the spinto that mimics reeds,
from them others are led into the song.

And then the others are gone, the voices
dropping away, until only the boy,
the same boy who began, is left holding
his voice in the silence, the one echo
of the first reed-note, the single remnant
that allows us to remember the choir.

GEORGE WILLARD READS BASHO

The sounds are stones polished
until they are mistaken for glass,
they slowly erode into sand
and are swallowed whole by the ocean.

The words lie like earth
dark on the face of a fresh grave,
or huddle together
in the muddy palms of puddles.

The poems are made of wood,
ribs and rough-skinned arms,
they are whittled down
into unstruck matchsticks.

OUT OF SEASON

In the slump toward winter
there is wood smoke out of sight,
and darkness in the leaves.
Wind brings little grains of cold,
each grey day shorter.

You wore summer on your skin
long past the season's end.

Here, far from where you are,
winter grows, tangled. Fish swim
under the lake's new found skin,
bee-sick weeds swell past the ebb
of summer's numb heat.

Even in autumn, you are present.
Even in August, frost waits to be born.

TIME SQUARE

I approach 42nd Street; taxis scuttle down Broadway,
snow slowly covers phone booths and parked cars.
The neon garden of Times Square
is no longer filled with “grinder” houses.
The city is a franchise now.

I stop for coffee.
The waitress, young, dark-skinned, pours coffee,
the steam snakes into the air.
She is watching the snow.
I see her thinking about her walk home;
I have known that same cold.

I drink, the vapor covering my sight.
In the *Daily News* a “tight-knit family
of crack dealers” no longer thrives,
their run-down brownstone closed after two generations.
Another poor woman has been found dead from exposure.
Tomorrow calls for more snow, and sorrow.

JUNE

This is no longer the season
of seed-cases standing above soil,
or mildewed rain.
Knuckled fists of fruit
hang thirsty on the stem
in this bronze blanket of summer,
when morning and evening are the same,
and breath is too heavy to carry.

I turn into the shadowed end of the field.
Still in the tree shade, the deer,
eyes fluid with fear, pushes
hooves into a run that will not come.
The pavement is cool against my feet.
Her breath gone, her eyes turn headlight-white
and I lift her away from the road,
carrying her to the field.
My father's Chevy lies gashed and broken.
I lay her on the ground,
next to the empty engine compartment,
two bodies to rust together.

IN THE STADIUM

For Victor Jara

The table was fetched by soldiers
to the middle of the arena
so six thousand prisoners could see.

He placed his hands on the table as ordered;
the ax in the officer's hands fell.
"I have two beautiful children and a happy home,"
the officer said, days afterwards, to the foreign press.

The first stroke severed all fingers but the thumb from the left hand,
a second stroke all but the thumb from the right.
Like lightwood, they fell to the wooden floor still moving.
Like timber the body fell, too.
Twelve thousand eyes watched the officer
hit him, screaming, cursing him and ordering him to sing.

Hands dripping, his face turning violet, he raised himself.
Blind from blows he turned towards the bleachers, his steps faltering,
his bloody hands stretched forward like a sleepwalker's.
When he came to where the arena and bleachers met,
he sang the anthem of the Unidad Popular.
Six thousand voices sang with him.

Then came a volley from the mouths of machine guns.
His body began to fall forward, bowing long
and slow, in reverence.

THE GREAT DICTATOR

Two bodies and the open road,
both fading like Chaplin's optimism;
The Great Dictator,
his first not to have such an ending.

In 1940 there was no Nacht und Nebel,
no set way for a movie to disappear from view,
no fixed solution
on how to end a film.

Chaplin's tramp knows this,
his pigeon-toed step the same as eighty-six movies before,
the one thing that stayed the same.
This time Paulette Goddard is the girl.

Now the tramp and the beauty
have married, not on screen, but in life,
Chaplin habitually blurring
his character and himself.

Goddard, the third woman to be his legal lead,
the oldest woman he ever romanced,
the only divorcé,
was nominated for an Academy Award without him.

A creature of habit, Chaplin
had ended his films with the dark line dissolving into the horizon,
a female body,
and the chance of a happy ending.

Now, always just a step out of frame,
history, Goddard's beauty become a blanket,
Chaplin's tramp fading
into night and fog.

DEATH FROM EXPOSURE

Through the trees, the dark pawed from the edges.
She could see it through the watery glass of her window,
through the leafless branches that reared up

outside her Garment District apartment.
She should have kept herself moving,
kept the cold away.

There was work to be done,
dusting photographs, sweeping the hall
between the bedroom and the rest of the house,

bills to be paid.
She felt the cold folding in on her
and wanted to rest a moment.

She sat and watched as the sky changed,
the blue-blush began to orange,
yellow and red marbling between clouds.

She watched as the reds faded into lavender,
and then into the near-black,
the deep purple of blood in her lips.

ELEGY FOR MY MOTHER
(Sarah Lucy Sabatelli 1942-1997)

1

As the moon decayed behind the horizon
and your grandson slept in a bed infected with dreams,
you found your death.
You had fought it when you were four,
a sliver of glass connecting your wrist to your brother's hand.
At twenty you flirted with it in the wards of Silver Hills.
You had always known where it was.
You saw it when you dreamt of Venezuela, of your childhood.
When your husband died, you met it
in dark corners of restaurants
and drank with it as your liver failed.
When you tired of its company you sent it out
to wait for you in an ordinary hotel room,
to wait as ascites bloated your skin
and jaundice colored your eyes.
You grew empty, forgetting it with the same care
you took to forget yourself.
It waited, under frayed blankets,
between sheets that smelled of stiffness.
It waited as the air conditioner gurgled night in that room,
where nobody knew you.

2

My son wants to visit the place he last saw you.
He wants to remember the coffee-colored ground
and the autumn air that pressed his cheeks
when we buried you.
He believes he will remember your floral print,
that his memories grow like dandelions
from the soil.
In the past winter the snow compacted the ground,
and now above you there is a hollow in the ground.
The trees still dress in shadows,
and the beautiful stubble of grass has begun to grow again;
but there is no marker.
There are no flowers.

3

That day your hands held the color of sickness,
knuckles bent stiffly, weaving your fingers into each other,
your wrists too thin to have held me.
They were not your hands; they had never been your hands.
Your unpainted fingernails were the purple of your dress.
I remember how the hair was brushed away from your face,
the gray roots like rage.
The fluids that had filled your face,
that had inflated your chin and thinned your lips,
pulled away from your face now.
There was no more bloating around your eyes.
Your jaw became square with the fluid;
the skin of your face became taut from the weight.
Sharp bones cut across your face; your flat forehead was free of years;
there was a thin-boned nose that belonged to a girl gone
before I was born.
This was a face I had seen only in photographs,
a face that looked more like me than you.
This face was yours, before you forgot who you were;
it had always been yours.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Christiaan Sabatelli was born in New York City. At seventeen, he found out that he was about to be a father, and at eighteen he worked at his first Renaissance festival. After that first festival experience, Christiaan moved to Florida to “winter” and get ready for the next year’s festival circuit. He spent five years or so kicking around the country working Renaissance festivals, then became bored. In an attempt to jump-start his brain again, Christiaan went back to school and earned a bachelor’s degree from New College of Florida. He still has his son; and one day the two of them will leave Florida, a place he never intended to live in so long.