New Poetry by Joddy Murray: “Aphrodite Urania,” “Chronos After Castrating His Father,” “Grandpa Uranus, Rainmaker,” and “Uranus’ Genital Blood”

WOMB OF FOAM / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Aphrodite Urania

From a womb of foam I
came to be a woman, heavenly
gestated from Father, who also brought
weather, seasons. He is a castrate
and timeless, the bluest of planets.
As a warrior, my courage
is to stand by my brother while his
hunger weakens him, devouring
days, years — his children. My
courage is to persevere while
the sand under the waves carve
portraits of Mother — her power
quietly stronger than anything else,
ungrounded, unfathomable.

Chronos, After Castrating His Father

The sickle Mom gave me was super sharp, so all I had to do was, like, sneak up on the old
man — who always ignores my AWESOMENESS anyway and has so many

fucking kids like
he’s the king of the freakin’ universe – get underneath that nasty tunic he wears (with the
blood and guts of all the meals he eats but doesn’t need to eat cuz he’s a God and all), and
from behind simply grab ’em, slice, and run like hell. Why did I think this would be a good
idea? Just because I hate the man, and the way he treats Mother is shit. But it was easier
than I thought. He didn’t follow, just shrunk down to the ground where his ball blood was
splattered and I could tell as I ran that there would be giants and furies and monsters
born out of that blood. I hoped the sea would bury his testicles as I tossed them as far as I
could, standing on a cliff, sure that all would be better now and my time here would calm.

Grandpa Uranus, Rainmaker

My grandfather no longer visits
with his blued capes that cover everything –
his foamy genitals an island for
Aphrodite. My name, Urania,
is his and my sky is his, the
sodden breezes still spray
my eyes so I look up. Don’t bother
charting the skies. Astronomy
is family. Look for me when you
are angry, I’ll kiss your temple
and promise you your future
and pray to my grandpa, the
father of giants and furies and
all that I turn from in my shadows.

Uranus’ Genital Blood

When my son cut off my testicles
and threw them to the sea, I thought
about those cherries I left for you
in a porcelain bowl by our bed.
His reason, Gaia? You, my darling.
So I’ll sire no more children, darken
the skies no more, abate the thunderstorms,
give the bloodied sickle away
and make some Phaeacians as I do.
Time himself, Chronos, betrayed me
and I’ve set a growing hunger in him.

What beauty could come of this
or the sea? Beauty itself?

New Nonfiction from Karl Meade: “Knee-Capped”

We all live in a kind of delirium: as if we have control of our lives, while we know damn well something is coming. We don’t know if it’s coming from the inside or the outside—a disease or a rogue wave. We don’t know when or where. But we know it’s coming.

For me, I always thought it would be my stomach, or water. I nearly drowned at two, and that seemed to do something to my stomach—twist it into a sinuous time bomb. My dad, who never

forgave himself for my near-drowning, always thought it would his heart, or his brain. But never his knees.

*

When he wakes lying on his back in the dark—he tells me later—his whole body throbbing, his mouth dry as sand, his tongue so swollen he can't even lick his lips, he hears cockroaches scuttling, water dripping. He thinks he's in a cave. He has to get out. He'll never survive here.

He lifts his head slowly and looks around. A shaded window, a door rimmed with light. He tries to sit up but his arms and legs are strapped to something metal. Voices in the distance. He calls out, quietly: *Lorna?*

The door bursts open to a blinding light. *God no,* they're back: two figures in white lab coats brandishing shiny weapons. One grabs his leg and stabs his thigh with a knife of ice. A woman's voice says *it's okay, Ray, relax*—but it's a trick—she grabs his head and sears his eye with a laser. He thrashes wildly but they pin him down, voices barking orders, eight hands on his limbs now—where did the others come from? They strip him bare, rip off his underwear. A hand grabs his genitals.

No, he cries.

Finally they let go and slip out the door. Darkness falls. His heart pounds. Cockroaches ooze out of the walls. He counts his breath, like they taught him at boot camp: *in* two-three*, out* two-three*. Stay calm. Survive*.

*

"You see that, Karl?" Nurse Sandra leans her full weight on my dad's wrist, his massive hand curled into a fist. "He's trying

to punch you in the face."

I can barely hold his other arm down as his wild blue eyes glare up at me, his face glistening, his hair a frizz of grey, like he's been zapped out of the sky. It takes two nurses to hold each leg—at seventy-eight, he's as strong as the day he enlisted.

Sandra says, loudly: "It's okay, Ray. You're at the Ottawa-Carleton Hospital. I'm one of your nurses."

"It's *Major Meade* to you," he says.

"More like Major Trouble." She smiles, but Dad doesn't react. "You had your knee replaced yesterday, Ray."

Now he laughs, derisively. "Your comrades tried that one already.'

Yesterday he was clear and calm, couldn't wait to get "back into action." I flew in from Vancouver to help him through his physio, at home—drink a few beers, watch a few games—but now I watch, helpless, as they tear off his Velcro-ed diaper and take a urine sample.

"Hands off the bird," he says. He starts giggling. "Stop, that tickles! You're making me horny!"

They put on a new diaper and strap him down. I follow Sandra into the hall, my stomach a rope of fire. "What do I do?"

"Someone has to stay with him. Just go with it."

"Go with what? What's wrong?"

"You'll have to ask his doctor." An alarm sounds down the hall. She looks left and right, her forehead creased. "Betty!" she shouts down the hall. She glances at me—"The drugs should make him sleep now"—and rushes off.

In my dad's cramped room of steel and plastic, I find him

turned completely around in bed, his head at the foot, the IV cord wrapped around his torso. “Dad, how did you do that?”

“I don’t know.” He stares at his hands as if they belong to someone else—these blunt-fingered hands that taught me how to grip a golf club, how to flip an egg, even how to change a diaper. He looks at me, upside down, tears in his eyes, pleading: *“Get me out of here.”*

“They said you have to stay in bed, Dad.”

His face hardens. “It’s your country.” He reefs his arm sideways and rips out his IV. An alarm beeps and Sandra rushes in. I shrug—”sorry”—while she turns him around and tightens his straps. Someone walks by in the hall and Dad calls out: “Help! Help!”

“Shush, Ray, you’ll alarm the other patients.”

“Patients my arse! We’re prisoners!”

Sandra re-attaches his IV and injects *oxy*-something into it. Dad lies back and she smiles at me, but I see the fatigue in her eyes, the fear—unlike me, she knows what’s coming.

She rushes out and I settle into the chair at the foot of his bed. It’s past midnight, I’m exhausted from the long trip out here, and now *this*—whatever this is. But he keeps pulling me into his waking dreams: eyes open, swearing, laughing, crying. I’m his brother in Korea, his drunken father in Halifax, my mother Lorna before she died. Then I’m his guard and he’s a POW in Germany. Every time I close my eyes, he makes a break for it—yanking the arm straps, clawing his IV—and I pop up from my chair. He freezes—caught in escape—then plays casual: “Want some advice, Sergeant Pop-up?”

“Sure,” I say, to engage him.

“Stop jogging.”

All night he cries for help, calls me *bloody Kraut, Sergeant Pop-up, Karl with a K. Born in Germany, eh?* He laughs, wildly, derisively. Finally, at 5 a.m. his eyes close and he weeps, quietly, for my mother: *Lorna. Help me, Lori*. Even though she's been gone for thirty years, her name on his lips grants us both the gift of sleep.

*

I wake to a weak winter sun through the window, with my dad staring at me—his youngest son—slouched in the chair in the corner, my coat over my lap. I see tears on his stubbled cheeks, fear in his glazed eyes. Or maybe it's my fear I see.

Then his eyes narrow. He picks up a crust of toast from the tray across his lap and chucks it at me. "When the hell did you get here?"

I smile, relieved—his old self, the joker. I sit up and stretch my arms overhead. "Yesterday. Don't you—?" I catch myself.

He nods at me, stares, as if taking me in. I know this look of his. For years he's teased me that my mother said I was the daughter she never had, that I have her sensitive eyes, her slender fingers, even her mouth. I've caught him, over the years, looking comforted to see me, but also saddened, remembering Lorna.

I hear a deep, familiar voice down the hall. Ken, my oldest brother, strolls in carrying three coffees. He's the epitome of tall, dark and handsome, with a quiet confidence I've never felt in my life. I feel my shoulders drop, as if the cavalry has arrived.

"Good morning," he says, placing a coffee on Dad's tray, studying his eyes to see if he's there. "Feeling better?"

"Bright and chipper," Dad manages, hesitantly. He looks from

Ken to me. “I didn’t do anything bad last night, did I?”

I stand up, glad to hear him lucid. “The Major? Bad? *Never*.”

Suddenly he glares at Ken. “Who are *you*? You’re in one of those gangs, aren’t you.”

Ken and I trade glances. Adrenaline grabs my stomach. The day-nurse enters, a short Francophone woman named Genevieve, with dark hair and bright, friendly eyes. Dad gestures at her uniform. “That’s nice. Did you put that on just for me?”

‘Ah,’ she says, wagging her finger at him. “I heard about you.”

She takes his pulse, smiles at us, then at Dad. “Where did you get that nice tan, Ray?”

“Walmart,” he says. “Blue Light special.”

Genevieve looks at Ken and I. We both shrug, just as the doctor walks in, clipboard in her hand, hair pulled back in a severe bun. I can see she’s a hard-ass, which Dad will like. She doesn’t ask how he is, just gets right to it. “What day is it, Ray?” Her voice is loud, like he’s hard of hearing. I resist the urge to say he’s not deaf.

He blinks and shakes his head hard, as if trying to uncross his eyes. “Sunday.”

She writes on her clipboard. “It’s Thursday, March 11. Do you know the year, Ray?”

“1932,” he shoots back.

She nods. “That’s the year you born. So that’s good, but right now it’s 2011.” She flips to a new page and hands Dad the clipboard and a pen. “Can you draw me the face of a clock?”

Dad raises his hands in the air: it’s a trick question, an accusation. “I haven’t seen O’clock’s face in thirty years.”

She flips the page back on the clipboard. “Ok, Ray. How about this place? Where are we?”

He looks around the room, then blankly at me, then Ken. His eyes widen and he snatches at something in the air, like a fly.

“*Ray,*” the doctor says, firmly. “When did you last drink alcohol?”

He sits up straighter, tries to see out the window. “Where did the water come from? Is this a prisoner ship?”

Ken steps forward, calm and polite. “Ray stopped drinking two weeks ago, just as he was told to.”

“*You*, stop talking!” Dad jabs his finger at Ken. “He wants my pension. My own son, betraying me!”

“He’s not betraying you,” I say.

“Now it’s both of you?”

“He’s saying you *stopped*.”

“I never took you two for squealers.”

Ken and I look at each other. Genevieve touches my arm, then escorts Ken and I into the hall.

*

“It’s more confusing to him,” Genevieve says, in the hallway, “if there’s too many of us.” Her hand moves to the pager flashing on her belt, but she doesn’t look at it. Her eyes tighten, as does her demeanor. “Let’s stay out here and let the doctor do her job.” Now her pager rings aloud and she strides off down the hall.

As I watch her and two other nurses rush into a room, I feel like I might vomit: fatigue, fear, confusion. I glance at Ken,

for big-brother guidance, but he has a deep crease down his forehead, staring at the door to Dad's room.

"Do her job?" Ken says, shaking his head. "They always go to the alcohol. Blame the fucking patient."

The doctor emerges, and Ken cuts her off.

"Excuse me," he says, politely. I know he's seething, but he sounds calm and cool. "But what's going on with Ray?"

The doctor glances down the hall, then counts off her fingers. Her voice is as cold as the pale green walls: "It could be stroke, TLA, infection, anaesthetic reaction, electrolyte imbalance, alcohol withdrawal—"

"—I told you he stopped drinking two weeks ago," Ken says.

"Look," she says, "he's getting the million-dollar treatment. Blood tests, urine, EKG, we've even pushed through an emergency MRI to see if there's been a stroke." She says it like that, as if the stroke is somewhere out there, rather than in Dad's head. "You'll have to trust me."

Genevieve sticks her head out from a door down the hall. "*Doctor.*"

Ken takes the dayshift to sit with Dad, while I go to Dad's to unpack and rest. But first I stop in the lobby to call my wife on Salt Spring Island, off the coast of Vancouver. When I say *stroke,* my voice buckles. "I truly thought he was gone," I say.

Beside me, a youngish bald woman wearing a kerchief, sitting with a girl on her lap, hears my voice break and smiles at me, kindly. I glance at her daughter and my heart sinks. My mother died when I was seventeen, but this girl is more like seven. I try to smile back, but my throat squeezes into a sob. I shove it back down but I can no longer speak. My wife tells me to call her father, a retired surgeon. He'll know what to do.

I steel myself and call. He doesn't miss a beat: "I saw it all the time, Karl. It's *overhydration*. Your dad's drunk on water. Get them to turn the IV rate down."

I search out Genevieve, the day-nurse, and tell her. She shrugs, apologetically: "Doctor's orders."

I see the doctor and literally chase her down the hall. She sighs, and says, flatly: "*Drunk on water*?"

My voice seethes—not calm, not cool. I'm the youngest, the hot-head. "My father-in-law was Chair of the College of Surgeons! He's not just some quack with a theory!"

There are nurses and patients and visitors in the hall. Everyone stops. They've heard Dad's cries for help.

The doctor looks me straight in the eye. "Sir, lower your voice, please."

I manage to lower my voice. "He knows what he's talking about."

She does not waver. "I'm sure he was good in his time, but we have protocols now." She looks at her watch. "I have other patients."

I stand there for what feels like a long time. Patients and visitors walk past, trying not to stare. Finally, I shuffle out to the parking lot, sit in my rental car staring out the windshield at the hospital. I try to figure out which is Dad's window, and what's happening to him in that room. When my head bobs forward in sleep, I drive slowly, dreamily, to Dad's house.

*

I should sleep, but instead I go for a long, slow jog through my childhood neighborhood, retracing the routes my dad and I used to run. After showering, I Google "overhydration," print

out my findings from McGill University Health Centre, and plan to hand a *fait accompli* diagnosis to the doctor:

“Overhydration can lead to dangerously low sodium levels in the blood, or a life-threatening condition called hyponatremia, which can result in brain swelling. Because the brain is enclosed in the skull, it leaves almost no room for expansion, which can cause headaches and brain fog, even cognitive problems and seizures.”

Then an email from my father-in-law says exactly the same: “This condition is well known and the causes were worked out in the 1960s. It is nothing new.”

I’m so angry I can hardly breathe. I try to calm down, get some rest. I spend the afternoon wandering the rooms of my childhood house studying the photos on the walls and dressers and tables. I even lovingly admire his duct-taped broom, his black-taped toaster—two of many testaments to his lifelong Air-Force Supply-Officer modus operandi: nothing gets junked.

When I return in the evening, to my relief I find a note from Ken saying Dad was “pretty clear” for most of the day—”fingers crossed.” I collapse into the chair beside Dad’s bed. I can’t believe it’s still Thursday. I’ve only been here for twenty-four hours, but it feels like a week. He smiles at me, a bit oddly, like I’m a stranger on a train. We begin the nightshift watching TV in his room. He’s laughing at Jerry Seinfeld, and I’m so relieved to see him lucid that I need to wipe away the tears.

“God, that’s funny,” I say, pretending my tears are because of Seinfeld.

A minute later, he tries to get up. “I have to go home. I have people expecting me. My son Karl is coming.”

“I’m Karl.”

“You’re not my son. My son would let me get up.”

He starts twitching and flinching. He folds his arms to keep them still. Then he swats the air, points at the wall: “That one’s tall!”

By ten o’clock he’s gripping the bed rails like an amusement ride, his wide eyes flicking from one wall to the other.

“You okay, Dad?”

“Watch out,’ he says, ‘those spiders are jumpers!”

Nurse Sandra arrives with a trolley of meds and needles. Dad settles down, plays calm for her while she chats away, taking his vitals, reading his chart. But when she jabs the needle into his IV, he says, “No more of that, thanks.”

Sandra chuckles. “It’ll help you sleep, Ray.”

“*Please,* no.” He looks at me, desperately. “*Please*.”

She glides her trolley out of the room and I follow her. I tell her about overhydration, hand her my crumpled pages of research, but she hands them back, gives me the same answer: “Doctor’s orders.”

I turn away. I think maybe if I had more sleep, or was a better person, a better son, I could be more useful. Every time I walk down that hall back to his room, I feel like I’m walking into death. I pull my chair closer to him and read Sam Shepard’s elliptical, almost drugged-out stories, and Dad loves it.

“When you come to Ottawa, you have to come visit me.”

“On Ogilvie Road?” I say, testing him.

“Good memory,” he says.

I close the book, pull my chair to the corner, and before I

know it he's sunk into a mime of drowning: back arched, hands gripping the steel rails, his nose in the air, trying to stay above water, trying to breathe. Later he says the IV shot him off a cliff into the sea. But right now he can't close his eyes. I'm his mother, after her heart attack at fifty: she's here, sinking with him through all those eyes lost in the Halifax explosion. I'm squeezing his hand, as his mother, then he's *my* mother, Lorna, saying to me: "What a good boy you are, Karl. What a good boy."

The water streams down my face. What am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to say?

Sandra appears as if from a dream, taking Dad's vitals as he gazes up at her lovingly. "You're being a good son to your father," she says to me.

I can't even say thank you.

She places her hand on my shoulder. "It's hard to see your father like this."

The night plays out much like the first. He takes me on his full tour of duty: Halifax, Moncton, Montreal (where he met Lorna), Germany, Manitoba, Comox BC, Ottawa, Greenwood Nova Scotia. His eyes wide open, he draws me into his Halifax childhood, his Air Force boot camp, his mother dying, Lorna dying.

At 3 a.m. his eyes finally close and I wander down the pale-green hall into the pale-green common room and stand in front of the muted television: a science documentary showing a strange ocean wave stretching along an entire coastline. My mind keeps expecting the wave to break and recede, like any wave, but it doesn't. The wave crests a sea wall, hits the shore, and rolls through a town—buildings collapse, cars bob like toys—then continues into the countryside, swallows a road, rolls up an embankment, and engulfs an entire bridge full of cars and trucks. A woman and her son clamber onto

their car roof, watching, helpless, as this wave out of nowhere just sweeps them off the roof and they're gone.

A caption scrolls across the screen—LIVE: *Tsunami Strikes Coast of Japan*—and I realize, my God, it's the *news*. I return to Dad's room and sit in the chair, watching his chest rise and fall. My hands won't stop shaking. All those people—that mother and son—*gone*, just like that. And Dad—where has he gone?

Finally, my eyes close and I'm caught in a wave of bodies and cars drifting through a recurring nightmare from my childhood: my mom and dad and I, trapped underwater in abandoned warships. I've had nightmares of water, been afraid of water, since I nearly drowned at two years old. My dad always blamed himself: he turned his back for a few seconds—"*Seconds*!" he cried—then found me face down in the water.

*

The next morning, Ken finds us both asleep—mouths open, faces pale. "I thought you were both dead," he says later.

He quietly wakes me with coffee. We let Dad sleep while we talk. I tell Ken about my father-in-law's theory, and my confrontation with the doctor. "I think you better be the one to talk to her," I say, sheepishly.

Dad wakes, just as the doctor comes in on her rounds. She seems pleased. Her eyes almost smile. "Good news," she says. "The tests all came back negative. We've ruled out the biggies."

Adrenaline surges through me. "Then what's wrong with him?"

"Time will tell. Be patient."

I feel the tears rise and it angers me. "*Time*? He's drowning! Turn the water down!"

She goes on about protocol and treatment. How do you argue with a doctor, once you've raised your questions and been dismissed? It's my one hour of Google versus her seven years of medical school. I won't win, and usually shouldn't. But what if I'm right? How do I know?

Ken squeezes my arm, lets the doctor finish. When she leaves, Ken hands me a sheath of his own research. He and his son Conor have discovered Postoperative Delirium (PD), and Postoperative Cognitive Dysfunction (POCD). I quickly scan what he's printed, and the frustration rages through me. Both are well-known syndromes, "a central nervous system dysfunction that complicates the recovery of elderly patients following surgery." I read on, sweating. PD typically occurs on postoperative days 1 to 3 and is associated with prolonged hospital stays, increased risks for morbidity and significant health care expenditures.

I want to strangle somebody. But Ken talks me down.

I drive back to Dad's, fall asleep on his couch. *Delirium*: Hippocrates called it *brain fever*, but all I see is fear. Fear in Dad's eyes, fear in Ken's forehead, fear in my stomach. Even in the nurses and doctors, hidden beneath their professional cool.

When I return that evening, Dad's lying flat on the bed with his arms at his sides, wide-eyed and breathing toward the ceiling, mesmerized with "all the gibberish," as he later says to me. I squeeze his hand and he squeezes back, but he won't, or can't, let go of what he's watching on the ceiling. He tells me what he sees, like a romantic poet's visionary work, his own Kubla Khan, all of his family and friends in a "great film," as he puts it.

He's crying and laughing. "I had a great life. Lorna was such an extraordinary woman."

"You were a good man, too," I say.

“I’ll take that, Karl, but I could’ve been a greater man.”

“We all could’ve been greater. That’s what keeps us going.”

“I’ll give you that.”

Sandra comes in, then stops dead. She sees Raymond’s eyes welled up and wide, and mine brimming with tears. Squeezing each others’ hands. She leaves, without speaking.

Raymond says: “Karl, thank you for that.”

“For what?”

“For the great film you made. That was a mammoth production.”

“I didn’t make a film. It was your mind.”

“They don’t let you make films like that anymore.”

I open my mouth to speak but he stops me with a raised hand.

“Look at that waterfall! Jesus, it’s just beautiful.” He looks from the left corner of the ceiling to the right. “I love my family so much. My boys. I never bragged about them, okay, I guess I did.” He laughs and looks at me. “So, am I going to die now, at 79?”

“No,” I say. “That’s just your birthday.”

“Who’s coming for me?”

“We all are.”

His “film” lasts fifteen minutes. I hold his hand, he squeezes mine so hard, eyes glistening, wide with horror, then glee. “There goes sister Rosie, there’s Bob in a tank. He was a great fucking hero he was!”

“And there I go, into the grave. A great fucking smash-up.”

All night he lives this monologue, sleeping, awake, narrating

his visionary babel.

*

The third night, the fourth night, the fifth: Dad slowly rises out of the fog. On day five, our middle brother Dave arrives from Oklahoma and takes the nightshifts. On day seven, all four of us limp out of Admitting together, the walking wounded. We sit in Dad's living room and watch the news, stunned: twenty thousand people gone. We feel angry at the doctors, but lucky that Dad's still here.

In the coming months, he tries to tell us what it was like: the bugs, the cave, the dreams. Lorna right there in the room with him. Little do we know that the next seven years will play out like the past seven days, only in reverse, in slow motion. Next year he'll lose his keys, the year after that his car, then his words. Five years from now, when the diagnosis comes—Vascular Dementia—he will blame his knees: that it all started here. The fog that never quite lifted, just thickened slowly through his brain.

But I can't help but think of his near-drowning: what if I hadn't turned my back on him, not for seconds, but for days? What if I'd been calmer, more skilful with the doctor? What if I hadn't let him drown from the inside? Then, instead of checking him into a dementia floor this week, maybe we'd be walking together along the Halifax beach of his childhood, watching the waves roll in.

New Poetry by Carol Graser:

“Parkinson’s Triolet” and “Summer Isolation”

THE WIDENING FAULT / *image by Amalie Flynn*

Parkinson’s Triolet

I cup the base of your skull, catch
precious cells spilling out like salt
that seasons your limbs, your unholy lurches
I cup the drumbeat of us, mis catch

the rhythm, drop plates with a crash
You feed pills into the widening fault
My palm on the back of your head catches
our precarious marriage, heavy with salt

Summer Isolation

I paint the porch with strokes of blue
diamond. By sunset, it’s a veranda

of green and you have fallen asleep
at the shore of a lake that glaciers through

your dreams. You wake with stones in your
teeth and ice melting under your skin

You arrive home with feet delighted
by the verdancy at our entrance. We

dig holes in the ground, nests for roots
the width of thread. You shake ancient

drops of water off your bones. When
a ruby-throated hummingbird

zips past
we see it

New Fiction from Jim Speese: “The Darkness”

Sometimes these things happen. You wake from a deep sleep, whether a short afternoon nap or a long night’s slumber, and you’re disoriented. You forget things. Sometimes you shower and dress for work and only after breakfast realize it’s Saturday. Sometimes you stare unfamiliarly around the room you’ve lived in for years and wonder where you are. Sometimes it’s something simple—forgetting what was on TV last night or who called you just before sleep drowned you.

One night Jonathan Peters forgot where his light switches were.

It wasn’t totally uncalled-for. After all, the house was new to him, and it was only Jonathan’s second week in residence. It was an old farmhouse refurbished as a modern bungalow with all the conveniences and plenty of room. Full-sized windows occupied most of the walls, looking out into the yard, surrounded by woods and fields. It combined a rustic, rural feel with modern amenities. There were no neighbors, no streetlights, for miles. The nearest city, Brewer, was over ten miles away. Here, in the country, it was peaceful.

Jonathan had wanted comfort and privacy when he'd bought this house, and as usual, he got what he wanted.

On this particular night he arrived home from his job as a used car salesman about six o'clock. It was not a job he'd ever wanted, but he was good at it. He had a talent to convince people they wanted more than what they needed. He was proud of his ability to talk customers into useless upgrades, and his commission reflected this ability. At only thirty, he was doing quite well. This evening brown leaves flurried about his driveway like snowflakes. He only vaguely noticed. To him, autumn was just another season, October just another month. But it hadn't always been that way. He paused a moment, the key in the door, and stared at the leaves rustling and breaking free in the wind.

He watched himself distantly, a boy rushing home before night, before the darkness came on a Halloween night. He watched himself years ago, afraid of nightfall.

Any other time, any other month, the darkness was benign. February was too cold. The darkness was frozen deep in the Earth. June it was too warm, bristled with too much energy, the energy of boys released from school, the energy that fueled the summer. And even in September the darkness was toothless. There was a different energy at work then, the energy of the return of the school year, and yet the summer still lingered.

But in October the summer died, along with cornfields and leaves that still, mummified and brown, haunted the landscape. Only then some spirit seeped into the night, and the darkness became a thing alive. He'd always found an excuse to come home early in October, even Halloween, before he was surrounded by this darkness that came on the October wind to watch him from behind his window. And he would hide in his room with the light on, never opening his window. Never letting the darkness inside.

It wasn’t just the darkness, of course. It was what the darkness hid in its evil design. Creatures? Demons? He’d never really known. He’d only known they used the October darkness as camouflage.

No one had noticed his fear, not his peers nor his parents, and of course he’d eventually outgrown it. In time he’d even forgotten what a coward he’d been. But now, his key in the door of his new house, an adult, he remembered. He grimaced a moment, ashamed of his childhood cowardice. Then he smiled. He laughed. “What an idiot I was,” he said to himself. He looked at the trees, the fields, the leaves, the grass, the red sun sinking in the pink sky. “There was never anything there. There was nothing to be afraid of.”

He turned the key and opened the door. He stepped into the house, shuffling through his mail, which he grabbed from the floor, and turned on the TV news. He dropped the remote control next to his chair and prepared himself a microwave pepperoni pizza in the kitchen. He sat in his chair and ate from his lap.

After dinner Jonathan just stared at the TV set. He lay back on his brand-new chair, amused but tired. He was proud of this chair, proud of this house, his home, with the big-screen TV, the best remote, with all the modern conveniences. Soon the Wi-Fi would be hooked up, and he’d never have to leave his home. He’d come a long way from a skinny kid afraid of the dark. He enjoyed the moment of self-satisfaction. He let his bones seep slowly into the contours of the chair.

This is usually how sleep conquers: You melt into a chair, and the next thing you know, it’s two o’clock in the morning and the late movie is ending.

But just as Jonathan lay teetering on the edge of deep sleep, in that brief but eternal moment when you’re not sure whether or not you’re dreaming, the phone rang. It rang a second time

before Jonathan realized it wasn't a dream, a third time before he, startled, opened his eyes.

He moved to get up, already looking forward to lying back down again, this time in his bed. It wasn't easy. There was no longer any space between him and the chair. They had sort of fused, become one symbiotic organism. Pulling himself up was like forcing lovers apart.

With a frown, he managed. He staggered to the TV and realized he left the remote somewhere else. He glanced down at the box. There were no buttons—he couldn't change the channel or volume without the damn remote—but there was a power switch. He reached down and turned off the TV. There was a brief, eerie silence before the phone rang again. He reached into his pocket for his cell phone, realizing as he did so that he'd left it in the car. His house phone was ringing. One thing about the peaceful rural area he'd moved to was that he rarely had cell service, so there had been no need to bring his cell phone in. This was one reason he looked forward to the Wi-Fi being connected later this week. He wondered who had his new house number; he hadn't given it out to anyone yet. He, himself, didn't even know what it was. In fact, now that he thought of it, when had he even gotten a landline number? Hell, he hadn't even unpacked his computers yet. He looked to find the phone, wishing he knew this house a little better.

It rang again before he could locate it on the kitchen wall. He lifted the receiver only to hear a click, then a dial tone.

"Hello?" he said to no one.

He hung up the phone. He didn't mind. He didn't want to talk to anybody anyway. He just wanted to lie down. He was deathly tired.

He sighed and staggered to bed. He pulled off his shoes and socks and lay down, still in his clothes, gratefully among the cool sheets. He thought he'd just rest his eyes a bit. As the

sky darkened outside his window, the October breeze blew brittle leaves against the pane. Sleep fell like those leaves rustling, softly and gently.

When distant dreams woke Jonathan again, it was dark.

Not a complete dark, not a black dark. There was a bit of moonlight filtering through the window, but not much. Just enough to soften the darkness inside, to faintly outline the curtains and furniture eerily. Next to the bed Jonathan's alarm clock glowed 11:13.

The dreams that had woken him had been strange dreams. Dark dreams. Dreams from a distant and dark childhood, he was sure, and they floated in a dark haze outside his memory, taunting him with the memory of the fear the dreams evoked in him but not the dreams themselves.

He shivered and reached for the lamp. He felt a strange, tiny relief as his hand felt its way across the shade to the switch. He clicked the switch, sighing almost gratefully.

Nothing happened.

He clicked it again. And again. The sound floated in the darkness.

But nothing happened. The darkness didn't retreat. His thoughts cursed the darkness and his childish fear. The damn bulb was burnt out.

He rolled over, trying to sleep again. But it was too late. He was now wide awake. Besides, his dreams still haunted him. He was vaguely afraid to sleep, afraid of his dreams. What a fool he was! He knew that if he could only remember, now that he was awake, what his subconscious was so afraid of, he wouldn't fear. Dreams were like that. With the light of reality shed on them, they withered; their fears faded like ghosts.

But he couldn't remember.

He rolled over again.

Outside his window, somewhere in dark fields, he heard a rustling, a whispering. The wind, he thought. The wind through the trees. October trees. The October wind. He closed his eyes.

And his dreams fed his fear. He had no choice but to reopen his eyes.

“Damn it!” he hissed to the darkness. He obviously wasn’t going to sleep. His only choice was to get up, turn on the lights, find something to read, or fix himself a snack.

He began to sit up when a stray thought invaded his brain, a memory of a fear, a foolish childhood fear, a fear that had wracked him at ten years old when, in bed, his feet would slip out of the covers and hang over the edge of the mattress. And he would imagine hands, inhuman and evil, reaching up from the darkness under the bed, somehow connected to the darkness hovering outside his window, grabbing his feet with an unholy hunger and pulling him down into that darkness. He remembered how he used to never get up in the night to pee as a child, so afraid of the darkness under his bed. His parents had never understood why he’d wet the bed so often as he grew older.

As his feet now fell to the floor, he distantly wondered if someone, something, waited for them in the darkness under the bed.

Despite himself, he stood with alacrity and almost jumped away from the bed. He smiled briefly at his fear. He was no child anymore. There was nothing to be afraid of. Besides, soon the light would drive the darkness and his silly fears away.

He shuffled swiftly across the floor, out into the living room, and to the front door. His fear must’ve been caused by whatever nightmares had haunted his subconscious just before he woke, he thought. That and the new house—he wasn’t quite

used to it in the dark. The darkness itself made the house somehow alien.

He arrived at the door and reached out for the light switch, and another stray thought, another childhood and childish fear, floated to him. He imagined the door suddenly and violently ripping open as he reached for the lights. Dead, rotting arms, inexplicably powerful, reaching in from the darkness outside, the smell of newly dug earth and rotting flesh overpowering. He imagined, just for a brief moment, those arms grabbing him and pulling him outside. Out into the darkness.

Almost of its own accord, his hand locked the door. Then his hand slithered across the wallpaper, groping for the switch. Where was the damn thing? Would he find it before his hand rubbed against something else next to the door in darkness…? Shivering, he pulled his hand back like he'd struck a flame.

There was a noise, a scuttling, somewhere in the dark house. Somewhere in the darkness.

Roaches, he thought. Or mice. The damn things overran farmhouses, even clean ones, in the night, in the dark. His feet, naked on the cold rug, seemed to shrivel away from insects or vermin crawling all about him. His hand reached up again. Where was the light switch? It had to be here. He remembered…

And then Jonathan Peters realized he remembered *nothing* about the house. All the memories were shrouded in darkness, as if he'd never seen his own house in the light of day. As if he'd never used any light switches before, he couldn't remember ever turning on a light switch in this dark house. It seemed irrational but he couldn't remember where the light switches were. Any of them.

There was another noise outside, a scratching, a scraping far off. Or maybe not so far off. His hand abandoned the search.

There was no light switch here.

Suddenly he had an urge to urinate. As if from nowhere, he felt ready to burst. The urge was vaguely comforting, since he realized that he was certain where the light switch in the bathroom was. With a new confidence he strode to the bathroom, and his hand reached out again for a light switch, this time quickly finding it. He sighed.

He tried not to think of roaches scurrying away into the cracks as he flipped the switch. And in that same split-second, he remembered horror movies from his youth that had inspired nightmares of tiny demons born of darkness who snuck out from corners and chimneys and closets at night, hissing, whispering of murder, of stealing souls, of taking people down into the darkness, but scurrying like roaches in retreat from the light, disappearing once again into their crack. Until, of course, the lights went out again.

He flipped the switch.

His stomach turned to cold oatmeal and dripped into his bowels.

The light didn’t go on.

Somehow the light didn’t work. It couldn’t be a coincidence. They were coming, he thought; the darkness had swallowed the light, and they were coming to get him. He tried desperately to think rationally, to calm himself. He knew the house still had power. Distantly he could hear the refrigerator humming. Somehow, he told himself, one light switch must simply control another. Somewhere in his dark and alien house, another light switch, the master switch for the bathroom, was off. And he had to find it. Or the fuse box. But how?

He was trembling as he turned from the dark bathroom, unrelieved, to the dark living room. His eyes wandered the darkness, searching for some kind of help. The humming

refrigerator soothed him from a distance.

The kitchen. There must be a light in the kitchen.

Gingerly he stepped through the darkness once again, trying not to notice shadows within shadows. He moved slowly, trying to remain silent in the unreasonable fear that any noises he made could mask other noises he didn't. After a dark eternity he reached the kitchen.

He glanced in the dark.

He was cold.

He realized he was sweating.

There must be a light switch somewhere in the kitchen too, but where? If only he could see…

Suddenly, swiftly, he dove in the darkness for a drawer. He pulled it open insanely and grabbed the flashlight from the darkness inside. The batteries, he knew, were old. But maybe they'd last just long enough for him to find a light switch. He flicked the flashlight switch. Light gleamed from the utensil dimly into his eyes, blinding him momentarily.

Then it fell dark.

He cursed and shook the flashlight violently.

Again it glowed feebly to life, then died.

He shook it again, wildly, and then there was a noise somewhere behind the noise of the flashlight rattling, a noise somewhere near the front door. The flashlight flew from his sweaty hand and smashed into the floor, batteries flinging in all directions, as his widened but blind eyes turned to the noise.

There was no sound, only silence and the October wind.

It had been his imagination. So he told himself. There was nothing there, nothing but darkness. But it was the darkness that surrounded him, invaded him, choked him. Somehow he had to escape the darkness. He fell desperately to his knees, cursing himself for having left his cell phone in the car, searching for the batteries that had scattered like roaches, like demons, across the floor. He quickly found one but the other must've rolled under the fridge.

The fridge. The humming seemed to call him.

He reached up impulsively to pull open the refrigerator door and remembered other childhood nightmares of opening doors to find body parts, the refuse of a madman, a murderer, still hiding somewhere in the darkness, hanging in the cool air. The door opened and he was bathed by the pale light. He stood and, for a long time, he waited in the dim light, trembling.

Finally, after another eternity, he looked out from the kitchen. The house was still dark. This meager light was not enough to hold back the darkness for long. He watched the windows and the darkness beyond, the wind waving deeper shadows against the darkness. He imagined he could see eyes, orange and glowing, in the darkness outside, watching him silently through the window. A snout, like a pig's but not like a pig's, floated underneath them.

His own eyes retreated to the relative security of the refrigerator light and closed. He felt inexplicable tears trickle down his face. He swallowed. He turned again.

The eyes, or whatever his fear had made into eyes, were gone. He looked briefly along the part of the kitchen wall that was dimly illuminated by the meager refrigerator light for some sign of a light switch. He could see nothing.

He began to wonder insanely if there were any working light switches anywhere in this cursed house. He wondered if the architects who had redesigned the farmhouse had planned all

this, designed this house so he could never find a light, never escape the seeping darkness.

Sobbing audibly, he slowly and tentatively turned once again to the dark and silent living room. The digital clock on the TV glowed, a pale-red ghost, in the blackness—2:20 a.m.

Impossible, he thought. It couldn't be. He couldn't possibly have been searching for a light switch for almost four hours.

Lord, as a child, twelve midnight had never been as bad as 3 a.m. Three a.m. was the true witching hour, when everything all around was as dead as a graveyard. And the dead would rise, vampires, zombies, asleep in the dark basement would quietly climb the stairs and sneak into dark rooms. And at 3 a.m. we had no defense. It was the time of night when we were near dead ourselves, already halfway undead. Three a.m., with dusk and dawn a decade away, was the haven of darkness.

Another noise, this time somewhere above. But there was nothing above, only the roof, the attic.

Childhood nightmares again. A dark crawl space of spiderwebs and rotting wood. It never even occurred to Jonathan that he'd been in his attic only days before, that it was empty, that his new house had been thoroughly cleaned. Indeed, his house wasn't new to him anymore. It wasn't even a house anymore, simply a nightmare of other houses, ancient and haunted. It was a trap set up by the darkness after all these years to finally smother him.

He moaned, "Oh, God."

In desperation he dove into the darkness again, leaving the refrigerator door, a light in the distance, hanging open. He needed to find some more light, a more comforting light, in the living room. And he had a plan.

He grinned in victory as he switched on the TV, awaiting

pleasant human voices and light. Electronic snow fell on the screen, casting deep shadows across the room. Somehow, when he'd dropped the remote, the input had changed. His grin faded. The noise of static now hid all other noises. Shadows scampered around him. This wasn't good enough. He needed to turn it down, change the input, find some humanity. This was worse than complete darkness.

He needed the remote control.

He trembled uncontrollably when he realized that, like the light switches, it, too, was lost in a sea of darkness. And he couldn't remember where it was. Sweating profusely, his hand searched the couch, at any moment expecting to recoil from something cold and living hidden in the cushions.

It took forever.

He groped the floor, all the while expecting insects or spiders to crawl madly onto his hands, up his arms, to his sobbing face. Shadows continued to fly from the TV screen, phantoms, ghosts, demons.

He imagined watching the TV set, never aware that someone or something watched him alone from the darkness. Somewhere behind the static he heard the knocking, the scratching, the scraping somewhere outside.

The wind. The darkness. Who had called earlier and hung up, found out he was alone? Who hid in the shadows now, waiting for the right moment? Who or what? He fell to the floor, sobbing.

He wanted to turn off the TV, to stop the shadows running around him. But he was afraid of the deeper darkness and silence that would follow.

He was sure they were coming at him from every direction now. He could barely hear them behind the static, barely see their

shadows flitting in the corner of his eye. They were coming for him from the darkness. The darkness itself was coming for him, just as it had all those years ago when he'd escaped it in his room, trapped it outside in the October night.

It had waited. All this time.

He crawled to the wall, weeping, trembling, sweating, the shadows dancing all about him. He reached up pathetically, scratching desperately at the plaster, madly hunting the light switch. His fingernails broke, his fingers bled. He slid down the wall and lay on the floor, sobbing.

And that's where he was found the next day, in the light of afternoon, when the police had come searching for him when he'd not shown up for or called work. The TV was on. A pool of water had formed around the defrosted refrigerator.

He sat, his clothes soaked in sweat, staring at something no one else could see, his fingers bloody and raw. And just above him, a hole had been clawed in the plaster of the wall just below the light switch he'd never reached.

New Poetry by Betsy Martin: "About What You Have," "Female Figure in Photos," and "To Missoula"

GRASSES QUIVER BEFORE / *image by Amalie Flynn*

ABOUT WHAT YOU HAVE

In my dream
Dad, age one hundred twelve,
has his first cell phone—

big and square,
with a rotary dial.

With a proud index finger
he dials my mother,

gets her voice mail.
Together we lean in,
listen

to her low, drifty voice,
its mist so warm on my ear
as it rises from deep underground.

I ask Dad for *his* number,
but he can’t recall it
before fading into the passage. He’s left me

messages, though,
like: When eating fish be careful
not to get a bone stuck in your throat; when walking
tuck in the tummy; think
about what you have,
not about what you don’t.

FEMALE FIGURE IN PHOTOS

fourteen-year-old mop of hair
sullen air in mod raincoat

on London sidewalk with
beaming scowling father brother

seventeen leaning
on brick wall in black-and-white flannel shirt
no cigarette yet mien
as in movies seen through a puff of smoke

college-era long hair
akimbo arms
eyes narrowed
to spot foe in tall grass

sixty odd in a museum at a window
face a little wooden
and through the panes
an autumn-leafed tree flames

TO MISSOULA

The cold air her pillow of courage, she skirts
the northern rim of the nation.

As she crosses the Dakota Badlands,
where even the hardiest grasses quiver

before earth’s uprisings and revolutions,
her eastern forest home has tilted

and is sliding over the rim!

She pulls her wings in closer
to fly fast and low

over layers of pink and gray guts
squeezed from deep under.

A tail feather tears loose,

whirls away;

she almost bursts into a plume of magma.

Night cools into dawn.

She parks the car,
steps out into a new world,
a young woman with compass and camera
and a crown of mountains.