The Veronica Maneuver
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The Veronica Maneuver

JENNIFER MOORE
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I am closer to you
Than land and I am in a stranger ocean
Than I wished
—Barbara Guest

I heard, could be, a Hey there from the wing,
and I went on:
—John Berryman
AS A DEBUTANTE I ADJUSTED MY HATPIN

In the year of Our Lord the Electric Chair,
in the year of the Boozehound and the Unhooked Corset,
a lick of salt troubled my tongue.
A lick troubled me into telling the green girls
how to swing from the hundred-footed maple,
and the drowning woman how to sink into the river’s bed.
As with all things, the difficulty lies
in making maneuvers look effortless.

In this year of the Obvious Ankles, rouge is applied
with a heavy hand. Cheekbones are achieved
through sucking. Tired of tiny perfumes,
I want to be your voix de ville:
watch as I unfurl a web from my wrist.
When it flies, the trapeze artist sets sail;
in each arm, a bunch of begonias. Look how she
tosses her stems to the ushers.

If the sideshow acts fall through—
the moon walkers, the cloud counters—give me a spoon.
I’ll be the Depressor of Tongues, the one
to observe every soft palate. The candy-flossing crowd
opens wide, but the stagehand gives me the hook.
Now I play to the haircuts,
the last of the Disappointment Acts.
I’m the tooth that cuts the sucked cheek,
one of a thousand pennies sewn to the vaudevillian’s gown.
INSTRUCTIONS FOR GOING UNNOTICED

To disappear, become water. From the faucet spill out to the sea, then ride in the wake of the whale

’til the ocean is your body and you are the ocean’s. But if evaporation is what you want, pour yourself from kettle to cup; be sugar and dissolve. Make saccharine your song and sing it softly. To flee the observing ear, slip through a needle and fold quietly into the cabbage rose, unseen

and unsung in a green bed. Be sure to call yourself infant, meaning unable to speak,

and as a way of becoming wallflower, paper your body in paisley and love the corner that loves you back. Go un-photographed into the night. Muzzle anything that glows.
[I WENT TO THE CITY, CAME BACK WITH TECHNICOLOR]

I went to the city, came back with Technicolor. I came back with radio waves and ticket stubs. Lots of ballpoint pens, nothing temporary.

Never wanting all that neon, I dismantled the structure, uncoiled the blueprints, turned downtown’s steel wool into quilting bees and horse apples. Doesn’t each history contain another, possible body? The husk that could have happened.

Here, we bury our food to keep it cool. We shuck our own corn, just think *night* and it crops up. Here, repetition is the opposite of digression.

Everywhere, repetition is the opposite of digression. Why is it all I have are pencils when I want to leave something permanent? Or is what I want to leave anywhere for good, to never come back—

I was in the middle of a sentence about evening. Even landscape disintegrates. Do people still take lovers? Who says *lovers* anymore? What’s seductive is the absorption of one image into another: taillights. Box-cars. Apples in all of my needles’ eyes. A bad fever, this drive for departure—when I come back I will come back as someone’s sister,

a little unkempt, lost in a field of corkscrews. Wanting camaraderie, I will bring a strawberry buckle. Wanting something to unbutton, I will bring eyeliner, tickets to tonight’s game. I will come back, having forgotten I had ever left. Had ever torn the husk to its quick.
If I am carried by fork to the tongue,  
I will be carried by tongue to the throat.  

Your swallow will single me out:  
I’ll wait in a pocket of spittle, then fold  
into your windpipe’s wall. If you cough,  
I might multiply; growing there,  

I’m the thing that makes you guttural.  
The tiniest microscope will reveal  

I’ve embedded myself: a fuzzy burr,  
the bit you can’t swallow. Surgeons  

can repair the heart through the wrist  
and through the mouth remove  

a kidney, but can they unfasten  
the grain from your voice? I’d like  

to stay, a sprouting tattoo asleep  
in a house I could care for. Inside  

your cough, a million coughs  
and me, a seed inside a smaller door.
[I SENT MY BLUES AWAY, THEY CAME RIGHT BACK]

I sent my blues away, they came right back.
They came not as single spies, but full battalions of redcoats, greenhorns, and yellow jackets.
The cavalcade dazzles. My eyes can’t take it.

Each lid’s done its lidding. Drop a dime on each, then roll me down the depths of the hallway.
As nail, knob or knocker, Jacob’s dead, but his ghost slips through the doorframe.

About the horror of unlove, he’s got a story to tell. De profundis, but don’t believe the hell he depicts.
Nothing bad sticks; even Ebenezer had a way with women. They say, You’ll get over it. They say,

Try this: crook your finger, hook her collar, drag her all the way to Reno. There’s something there to dazzle the loneliest of men; a pleasure glimpsed through the slit of a skirt.

Thing is, all relocation affords is a chance to see griefs multiplied tenfold. Dart the rhino, then airlift her to another jungle. Upside down and woozy in the sky, every tree’s an unknown threat,

and the new landscape’s anything but. Instead I’ll stay put, painting the roses red. I’ll lie with the lamb and wait for new hazards to pass. Only plea: my head is killing me, so tread softly.
SONETTO

Think of the thing that dislocates your ear,
then imagine how the ear is recovered. The blast

and cure, what detonates and mends; and then,
how to restring the instrument. Here the gondoliers

have no need for us; they sing into their own canals
and navigate the city without sinking. Sound

is a form of energy that moves through air and water;
its waves of pressure collect in us. What you want

is char without fuel, sonetto, a little song to fill the jar;
you want shaken bottles and sudden explosions.

What I want is your flammable mouth, its cinematic
mottle and cue. We agree to disagree. Gondolier,

navigate the city without poles. Let the little song
and its echo fly through your unfastened ear.
THE VERONICA MANEUVER

It’s a difficult day for mercy. Tongues wag, and cash is tossed around. We’re in Spain, but it’s not the Spain you imagined; the arena’s a sawdust stage, a little horror musical. Aficionados make bets. Their cigars trail the opposite of clouds.

While picadors do prep work, we get bored. We peer at the *tercio* through opera glasses and ogle it with our phones. Let’s face it: we stare down the lens of whatever at whatever’s on display. Above all, we’re drawn to the gore of the present.

If I were a bull, I’d have to decide between focusing on a target and charging everything that moves. Either way, I’d get hooked behind the shoulder and brought to my knees in front of everybody. What the spectators want is the *estocada*, the death blow and difficult exit. So banderilleros toss darts into the bull’s back; then flowers for the matador, while the body’s dragged from the ring. You wear a muleta as a little retro jacket; we pour one out for the bull.
THE CARTOONIST’S DAUGHTER

In the comedy of snapshots, I was backgrounded:
was the wall full of flowers or the saddest lobster in the tank,

which still was somehow funny. In my father’s monochrome eye,
in the rough sketch and single panel gag

the girl with the torn stocking was me, Our Darling
of the Smudged Cheeks. The little one who caught the punch-

lines before they hit the trash, and the pencils that fell
from the pockmarked ceiling. But all his comic strips

keep losing their edge; they can’t fill enough of this room’s balloons
to trigger any sort of chuckle. Writing from inside a garbage can,

I’m waiting for the A-ha! moment, for the Alley-Oop
into real-time laughter—wanting the joke to slip on its own peel

and the eraser to do its job. I am the colorist of muted marvels,
the laugh drawn out and drawn in by his crow quill pen.
INSOMNIAC’S NOCTURNE

When night begins to arrive,
the tiniest joint in the body softens:

delicate as a cuticle, orchid,
or acute as a minute of migraine,

the ear inside your ear
listens for things that adjust
to dimness, that give advice
on how to read them: for sleep,

a tongue’s worth of sugar.
Always the milk warm. Lunula

when you need a place to doze,
the moon coming to rest

on a fingernail; then the hazelnut
and its collapsible husks.

And when you want
to be looked after,

when the tangible wire to waking
is severed and nothing is left,
I will be the river, spliced
into three kinds of leaving:

stilled tongue, lip of glass,
the sleeping water sent away.