A DIFFERENT BOTHER

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Beard of Bees Press Chicago, Illinois Number 49 February, 2008

Contents

Miles	1
The Whole Concern	2
Three Sonnets in Reverse	3
Pearl	5
Balanchine at Seventy	6
Magdalene to Christ	7
Monk	8

The Whole Concern" previously appeared in <i>The Chicago Review</i> .

Miles

I piped the dizzy for who knows how, argued, Without catacombs there can stand no town, and one night slid my head through the crown at church, then followed a river glued

to its ember. Who couldn't predict my brass would one day burst? That I, end-time, would stew in a velvet folly? A bashful kid, I consented to spoil the mildew's nap, decapitate the grass,

haul trash to the curb in bags that were, after transport, trash themselves. Never once did I aid the roaches treated like thugs in black suede. By travel, I hoped to find not heaven, but a rafter

where mind and body hang, negating one another. No such. Wind combed back the cattails, I turned in a circle that wouldn't point. Why decry the addict, who only seeks a different bother?

Someplace florid, a prince paints a topical picture. Imagine—art about actual happenings! Of course, of course, of course, of course, the unathletic started in: *Old world with your*

lovely clarities, etc. Then I thought of the stars—what trumpeted commotions fill their repertoires.

The Whole Concern

If we are meant to part, then we will with courage, ringing the bell and calling the sound *plum* or *cuckoo* or *jagged teeth of churchyards*.

We know it's possible to tear a life from its late milk, so it's no surprise a curdle shimmers in the known, receiving little applause.

The perfect cruelty comes in baby-tooth doses. No? Amazing we don't run off to dusty plains.

Sure, breeches sometimes fit too snugly, and it's hard to deny the way your love keeps falling headlong into you, like a drunk

you'll drive home and tuck into bed.
Every night forever-ever.
Oh, the whole concern is green, brief, wearing thrift-shop tuxedos, longing ball gowns.
Distance looms over closeness, too.
We're surviving like we're not acting.

Three Sonnets in Reverse

Astoria

Too blind to test a future more my size (our yesterdays kept landing in my eyes), I slid beneath the tracks in Little Greece, pausing before a dead bird on the walk. I play the witness whenever creatures freeze on a final weight. The wind, a scanning hawk, withdrew down Steinway Ave., home of piano makers. We sat Sundays divorced from sermons, you and I, oblivious to animals below: last flaps, stripped pelts, foreshortened runs. In a quarter named for John J. Astor—fur merchant, birder, breaker of ground—one dingy life concludes, eulogized, yet poor, unlike a great-grandson famously drowned.

Vagabonds, Blondes

Once stones and river churn in white time graceless, and reason dunked. Sunlight on a scarecrow's sleeve meant growth of fine. Then the 1:05 skipped town without—you who?—and friends and family swore it jeered. A line in water could comfort now, one baited and blue afternoon with answers blank: the zero of a sun ablaze on top of *the* exam. You thought you'd overcome the stiff-backed locals, won with your Japan of drifting smiles, plazas sought for space. Still, moonlight drags the river's bed for vagabonds, teenage blondes. It must cripple, if thrill, to see like God: bodies dumped undead, voices raised, bad sex of a good clear couple.

Balloons

In skins elastic, shot full of pores, gluttons for honey-coated punishments, we float, sons and daughters tied at the navel, as told in history texts—the abridged biographies of blood.

Love, your signature is a length of twine we clutch, alternately. Mine dots the sun, a red balloon like a drop in the yolk. Our child will someday call the moon a stone balloon, and I, professing, will detail lunar seas so mild no waters ripple there. We have stood in the eye of memory, calm as the hurricane's, and come through bruised. We'll hide this from him or her, and talk instead of the string that hangs from floating stone: invisible, cord to our first mother.

Pearl

she named the infant "Pearl," as being of great price,—purchased with all she had...

Praise steps that fell when I was kernel five and sank at school, cut from the speaking morning.

I read through village spin, suffered the inky fathers, their blessed, adept, granite accusations,

and grass itself coerced to hymn. Houseguests were little more than extensions of mind, droppers-by too pleased

with beards. Their dark-haired cousins burned with private wine. That wasn't why. I left for folds

of women, their tabled repertoires, five-clawed ivory clutching hair, despite the lurid eyes. Skeptics said

the next map, then the next, would force me back, but I knew already the flower-market smell,

crooked in custom and time, knew night stretched cold across the wind. For the groan

of happiness, heavy in secret, I no longer listened to or acted on my age. Ghost-high in my blood,

I sighed the afternoon blue and rode a tired beauty into love, set to mother my mother's double.

Balanchine at Seventy

Petrograd pedicured its milestones, and neither fortune nor free will could grant a marquee (though Misha the butcher still wiped hands on his sanguine gown). We might have stayed

if mirrors didn't lure, and whore lights, frayed at the hem, bloodstain the Neva for crossing. How long could one heart flash—on and off—its false *No Vacancy*

in that *rayon* friends called "old"? We bit the Judas plum, let juices trace our jugulars, while the summer of '24 hatched its suns. Did I hold you or you me, Tamara,

as cold stars slipped through gashes in tomorrow's side, and upwards on backwards lightning swallows flew? I never could have slept without your feet, uncut to this day by shells.

Words now lengthen in wind, the lighthouse swings its one good notion, and a thousand handy illusions help us forget the worthless rubles, buildings dreaming question marks of smoke.

There always will be kings and royal kids to murder; at least we thought of forward times. When tall grass sings today I lift old towns by the scruff, place them at your feet of sand.

Magdalene to Christ

In the fourth town after you disappeared, guys who were once our fever showed us how to clutch the knotty eddies, climb the river's rope. All the way to skull-shaped Africa, our logic porous as cork, we traveled, wrists tapping code to no one. We clambered over hills, wearing epaulets of dawn and evening suns, past fruits shut up in pies, with only slits in crust through which to breathe. Harsh coughs billowed handkerchiefs, men doffed entire scalps to us "ladies," and locusts played the number seven only. I knelt and hammered a nail to stop a floorboard's anguish. Nothing changed. How could it, with all this blood bother and ancestral shoving? The numbers you sang made us lose our count of wreckage. I must be someone's "aunt in America," where they say there's not much left of the cities' dark machines, just a few factories waving censers, cursed by prophets and fools. Not a lot remained for us. We observed ten year olds kicking futbols, teasing girls, adoring African cats. Tulips opened, delivered speeches; persuadable bees came rushing. Candle wax took the heifer's place in fiery sacrifices. That's something, I suppose. Maybe someday, from others' mouths, our history will climb. Two stones, you and I, we struck and sparked.

Monk

Beyond the huge notchmarks of valleys, boulders play dead and fate just sniffs and lumbers off. Where is he now, the riverman in wrinkled reflections? Under rain roofs, butterflied in bed,

I break off one by one the bygone dates, stick sprigs between my teeth and suck. 1918 tastes of noble blood. With you, I would have read graffiti at subway stops, heard below-ground songs devoid of treacle.

Men are beetles, you decide, who prize the last word, flavored like dung. Meantime, I rise on Sundays, show my mug at church. Holy wines recall Alexei, hemophiliac heir. (If not for the little bleeder, no monk

with wild-wild eyes.) You spend hours eyeing shoppers, their faces fossils embossed, believe they wish to join the mannequins. You yourself have passed for lifeless, as blacks once did for whites,

canned goods for the harvest, mothers for sealing wax. I must sound sometimes like mad Rasputin himself. Don't poison, shoot, drown me in the Neva. Last year, you cut for home, but storm gates opened.

I wait, avoid the pronoun business, as kudzu forces confessions from phone poles. By that I mean, *Sorry I never call*.

GREGORY FRASER has published poetry in the *Southern Review*, the *Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, and many other literary journals. A two-time finalist for the Walt Whitman Award, Fraser's book *Strange Pietà* was published in 2003 by Texas Tech University Press. His second collection, *Answering the Ruins*, will appear in spring 2009 from Northwestern University Press. He is the co-author, with Chad Davidson, of *Poetry Writing: Creative-Critical Approaches*, forthcoming from Palgrave-Macmillan. The recipient of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, Fraser is an associate professor of English at the University of West Georgia.