

six poems

**Monodrama**

Don't think, I said, that because I deny  
 Myself in your presence I do so in mine—  
 But whom was I talking to? The room empty  
 Beyond any standpoint I could attain,  
 Seemed all sill to stare off before someone's  
 Full length nude, at halfmast the pubic flag  
 Mourned every loss of disguise, allegiance  
 More to the word perhaps than its image—  
 But predators always bite the nape first  
 To taste the flower on the spine-stem, so  
 I spoke again, which shows how unrehearsed  
 I failed to be. I went to the window:  
 Sky from your vantage of death try to see.  
 Flesh drawn back for the first act of wound, it's me.

**Save As: Salvation**

Somewhere is the software to ID all  
 The snowflakes falling in this storm, though there  
 Ain't enough RAM crammed in my brain to call  
 Them forth by name, each crystal character  
 Putered and programmed, made to have a soul:  
 And even if I compelled the power  
 To inscribe them here as equals, in whole  
 Terms, I would not permit such an error.  
*But which is which, cries Ms. Ubiq-Unique.  
 We're not formatted for whiteout. And when  
 The screen of your vision freezes in flurries  
 And the core of this word blizzard hurries  
 To melt again, to find itself again,  
 Won't mine be the sign these syllables seek?*

**Mrs. Frye and the Pencilsharpener**

I'll remember how in 6th-grade English class, always  
 bending toward the desk I would try to avert my eyes  
 from the mysterious ways Mrs. Frye's hair displaced  
 the blackboard's space with its black coils, to the paper  
 my penciltip raced across, certain to pass each test:  
 and if these gaze shifts got too switcheroo I'd retreat  
 (daily, it seems) to the back of the packed classroom  
 where, leaning forward on my toes, I could push with  
 my left hand the nubile tube of wood into the mouth  
 of the pencilsharpener which hung there like some  
 natural protrusion of the wall, an indigenous Deity,  
 the mask of a Göddess, erosion-endowed, rockformed—  
 then feel my righthand fingers and thumb slowly turn  
 the oiled wheel while knowing I would have to face  
 close to that sac-shaped sharpener, have to smell  
 (want to smell!) its earthy, odorous depths, seeing  
 in my mind the parings inside, the musky dark curls  
 whose incense was increased of course like mold-mildew  
 by the subtle saliva we kids might use to lick the lead's  
 point, though nearly none of our tongues could unblunt  
 the conundrums grownups posed, in my case Mrs. Frye  
 especially: so if I lingered back there, grinding away,  
 it was not to gloat, not to play the saintly A-student  
 snickering from behind at the others' heads bent intent  
 as penitents, because I too, I sinned at times, whenas,

no matter how proud I was of my proper grammar or  
 propounded syntax, stuffing my text thick with fetish  
 parsemarks, I myself went taunted, teased by the urge  
 to erase the very prodigy evidence my page revealed—  
 all the knots and quirks of those perfectly traced letters—  
 to restore the blankness I spoiled with each sentence,  
 to castrate every phrase before its errors rose by rote  
 to make my cthonic-greatest mistake grow and grow  
 erectile, inherent, that habit hateful male participle  
 I always was unable to shear the nib off of, the stub—  
 (But how could I flub and flunk such a crucial ordeal?—  
 Forgive me: I was lost pondering, musing about a poem  
 memorized from the boys' bathroom, tongued fluent  
 but not understood: yet how truthshod its lines ran  
 to my anxiety—their meaning escaped the precocious,  
 the goldstar me—so if I stalled—if I stayed chewed over  
 and left a stammering dimwit by their immallarméan

import, which paired its print alongside a syllabus  
 of pornocoiled stick figures whose mouths were pierced  
 by the sharpened ends of toonballoons—verses verse  
 alone can't explicate in systematic prosaic terms that  
 forced and torsoed my head shy—if I was stuck on  
 their sphinxian simplicity—unable to decipher any  
 of the prodigal doggeral lessons gesticulated down  
 our school's scribbly corridors, snicked and snatched at  
 across its game fields, a whole curriculum of secret lore,  
 a litany of my-big-brother-told-me's, my-uncle-said's,  
 a rumor primer which claimed complete mastery of  
 the only discipline impenetrable to my inquisitive  
 quests never mind the autodidact airs I had to affect  
 during discussions of this topic, the nods and knowing  
 grins I wore to pass, to show my mastery of its arcana,  
 to prove what a pored nerd drill-diligent pupil I was  
 of those endless piss-walls, those scrawled rhymes and  
 confident lectures by croneys and guys who made sense  
 of the insane instructions re the sole subject I mark  
 zero on: all the dunno-dumb ideas I dunned then drove  
 core to me, carved their myths into me—and one in  
 particular goes to this poem, from the gendergabble  
 that gorged my brain: it hissed that She/the unknown  
 reared an inward toothly sheathdeath essence geared  
 to *vagina dentata* whatever pedant-pendant I'd proffer,  
 I, alma-matered to cram every exam with phallocratic  
 tits and sexist tripe psuedotype scionbabble, the entire  
 wisdom of my mentors' art-patriarch, old gobbledy-tropes—)  
 All gradeschool the fear of failing hovered in overstudy  
 as children riddled fears never to be learned, but could  
 I have continued to hone my fate, could I have stood  
 there for years and still the pencilsharpener wait  
 like a patient questioner, a warm, smiling teacher  
 filled with such dense scents, shavings, shorn graphite,  
 its soil rich with words no-one would ever have to write.

**Winter Regrets**

The snow on my ladder's rungs  
 seems to be stepping upward,  
 returning to that cloud which hangs  
 framed in the faded cardboard

of an old calendar landscape  
 whose dust holds the days I desire  
 to live in, fixing to climb up  
 past that summer sun and hammer

the scene in whole. I didn't haul  
 my ladder in and now it's too late—  
 I turn from the window and stare

lost at a vista of August air  
 tacked, half-peeled from the kitchen wall.  
 All the undone chores must wait.

### A Comic Look at Damocles

Sometimes Damocles is less afraid that the sword may drop  
 than that his enthusiasm for his plight might  
 —through the illogical process of displacement—  
 cause him to rise exuberantly up to it.

Once he glues a plastic bust of himself atop his pate;  
 once, while paring his fingernails with a pocketknife,  
 he sees an ant on the floor and throws it at it.  
 But all (both artistic and magic) remedy fails.

By old age he has quite forgot the deadly blade:  
 to his feeble sight, that gleaming flash above him  
 is himself, I mean his soul getting a headstart, already in flight.

In heaven he hears about an angel who tied a noose  
 to his own halo and hung himself from it, but sees  
 no way to apply the case, retroactively or otherwise.

### The Building of the Brazen Tower

#### 1. I, an ahem

I, an ahem, uncertain where to stand.  
 Unsurefooted as surveyors on clouds, preparing  
 further slums of heaven. I, glimpsed only  
 while entering or leaving a stab.

Is this why I long to betray the small  
 bodies left on the lips after love? Pale  
 empiricals, all pout; but then, some bumblebees  
 are larger than the flowers they land on.

What happened on all fours in my other life—  
 how staged, how improv each movement grew—  
 (kungfu of sequins) an eclipse also  
 maps what it mires: the none alone must know.

Hope is eating paper stripes off a jailcell.  
 Faith says, It's only a zoom-lens, not a fall.

#### 2. Poemplex

Ink phoenix, white carpet in a room in  
 penthouse highrise zones, all  
 built to commemorate the nail  
 Semiramis hung her gardens on—

reaching for which seals me  
 further in space, atrocity  
 as empty as colorless as a rainbow's rind.

Yolk dripping through binoculars—  
 you watch the morning's sun-amps fuse . . .  
 silence shuffles its deck of tongues.  
 Wisps of melodiousness and rats

in flower. Yes, isn't it sad:  
 the trafficlight on Lovers Leap  
 never changes to red.

BILL KNOTT teaches at Emerson College, in Boston.

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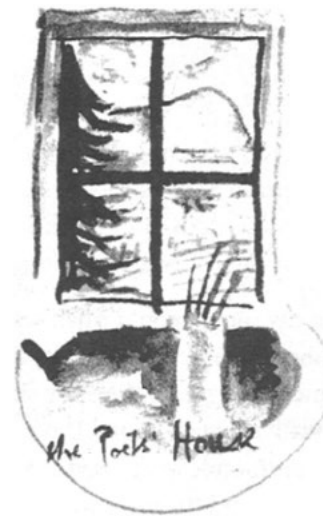
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