

Things Impossible to Swallow

Number 24 in the 2River Chapbook Series



"Snow" © 2013 by Victoria Rich

poems by Pamela Garvey

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Credits

<i>Main Street Rag:</i>	“A Review of Manson’s Album”
<i>Southern Indiana Review:</i>	“In the Light Provided by the Baltimore News”
<i>Superstition Review:</i>	“The Dark, A Child Listening”
<i>UCity Review:</i>	“At Your Request”

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The Dark, A Child Listening

to that absence

night after night, eyes prowling
the sky outside for the death regatta
breaking in the distance. I heard

their splashing, the churning depths.

My mind hurried to ready itself
for those immigrant throngs.
How long? How soon?
I couldn't stand then and can't stand now
the way day bruises so dark

that stars barnacle the dead's fleet,
how the owl-clock cocks its plastic eyes,

points lopsided wings at glowing numbers.

In the Light Provided by the Baltimore News

Outside wind sifted snow to the ground,
half burying whatever was dropped—
bottles, receipts, photo of a boy and a woman
hugging a dog. Inside
dull lighting in the bar barely defined
his unshaven cheek, rusty hair.
He spoke almost in a whisper, brushed by the hum
of garbled talk—all couples or small groups huddled
in conversations. He told me
about local bars: which had bands on weekends, which
had ladies' nights. I'd only been in town
a few weeks. I'd hardly begun to work again.
In those days I drank vodka, neat,
tried to learn new languages in preparation
for some big move, something important I couldn't
quite name, so I made up stories
about a Brazil that didn't exist,
a job as a correspondent, as if the man cared.
In one of those blanks in time
we came back to my place. No longer hunched
over a round cocktail table, gesturing with a cigarette,
but leaning over my bed, TV news
providing the only light and a perky blonde
reporting that a white male, thirty-two, killed
his wife and son, Don—that was his name, that
is what he told me, or
what I remember—Don, in his whiskey voice, asked me
if I ever thought about killing anyone,
my face in his hands, his mouth moving over mine.

Cocaine

hummingbird pulse
feeder taps its morse code into
the awning window blazing
with spikes of sunrise pupils
like wasp eyes winged things
under the skin needle cuts
the same niche in the record
over and over sweat spots
shirt, pants, the bed
trembles a few drinks to torch
the ice of consequence

What I Wanted

In response to Francis Bacon's *Two Figures*

I once painted walls, floors, even ceiling
black. I had sheets so white they shone like a canvas during sex.
They danced and blurred as if into the bodies of lovers
as anonymous as the men in this portrait: features so
hazy they look whitewashed. Are their eyes open? What
does the one man clench with his teeth—rag or rope?—
as the other straddles him, pins him down? Is
that man pinning him down? The brushstrokes shimmy
on this unprimed canvas, the rough side the painter always
chose. I, too, wanted the raw untreated surface.
So everything would soak in: another's sweat, another's weight
grinding the body, so high I forgot I lived in it. In the painting,
the arms, they flail so motion is all I can see. Like my past,
nothing is still, even though everything is still.

A Review of Manson's Album

The black and white, wide-eyed
Charlie on the cover
couldn't have prepared me for acoustic guitar, calypso
rhythm, a love-sick voice dropping
an octave: *It's all in the eyes of a dreamer . . .*
This could be a hotel lounge
where a man with a sliver of a mustache motions
to a lone lady in Boca Raton. The singer opens
a capella: *pretty girl, pretty, pretty girl . . .* He slaps
the guitar to speed up the song, his signature
for all the catchy refrains. *Clang, bang, clang*
goes the big, iron door, my favorite.
Mid-album he preaches about parenting
himself in the bowels of Arkansas
where plucked strings fed him plenty.
A whore-momma and seventy-something
daddies bring his voice to a quiver, then
a crack, bolstered by women who segue into an ode
to a garbage dump, the hint of a carousel
in the melody. The sopranos preach against *The Man*
in leitmotifs—*London Bridge, burn*
all your bridges—phrases he accents with a nasal
whine as he names each woman of the “family”:
Sadie, cease to exist; Squeaky,
cease to exist; Linda, cease to exist . . . and one voice
slightly behind another, holds that last word,
America, until barely a hum.

Elegy with a Child of the North

The word Yankee meant the thwack
of ball and bat harmonizing the Bronx, harmonizing the gravel
playground

of PS # 5, where we bartered away spring
with baseball cards. By autumn my father laminated my final
picks in plastic wrap,

displayed them on the coffee table between
sofa and TV. They glinted like a glass centerpiece for the World
Series.

When the games began, with blue markers,
I striped my toddler brother from collar to socks. I stuck gold
stars, one for each Yankee,

on his face and arms. In case one of us had to pee or eat,
our mother snaked every room with radios tuned to
second-by-second calls

and the fans stomping chorus: a static
joy that echoed around our house, smoky with burnt-black stew
and gum-like chicken,

left to overcook by all of us, too busy joining the crowd,
shouting, *Bring 'em home, Reggie. Bring 'em home!* Once he
struck the ball

he was off, off . . . he's gone, been gone for years,
and I'm walking home. It's Richmond, Virginia: a loose dog clicks
around the corner

leaving me alone with dead generals, still
on their horses, one-man cavalries in behemoth bronze statues.
Tonight I

station myself between Stonewall and his spotlights, lean
against the dated stone he rides over. I'd like to go Whitman and
celebrate Stonewall—

warrior, lunatic, stallion, armless saint without his lemons
alongside peddlers lining downtown, prostitutes shooting dope
a few blocks away.

But only days ago making coffee to rouse myself
from the haze of booze, I looked outside as detectives
photographed

a homeless man's corpse, blood
still flowing from his head. Whose wounds did I ever tend to

but my own? *Clean up the South,*
the saying goes, *buy a Yankee a bus ticket.* I circle these streets
daily:

school to work to third
floor apartment, walls still bare, boxes still unpacked. I have
failed to read the signs.

I have yawned at Sherman's abuses flung
from the lips of amateur historians found in every bar this side

of the Mason Dixon. I touch this statue, as if it would reveal
something more.
Its hands are as cold as mine.

Under Yellow Jackets

The man, asleep on the hammock, snores and doesn't stir at all as yellow jackets mill around his face and throat— attracted perhaps by the crust of barbecue sauce on the chin. At first she thinks to wake him. Instead she dreams of herself stinging his swollen neck with peroxide.

Without Me

It's as if you didn't breathe, eat, shiver or sigh. Crates stacked to go and blocking doorways, how can I forget smashed dishes, lies, cruel words? Why do I want you to miss me so much you can't stop trembling to steer the car, swerve into leaves falling to the wet street and slam into a truck? Doctors will pluck glass from your body, patch it with sutures. Who could walk away from those scars? When you wake in a morphine haze, it is my name you will drool.

The Distant

Dabbing my fevered body in alcohol, she hummed an old Irish
song, its hunger—
the dead, the distant.

Several times the song petered away, the hand holding the
sponge hesitated
above me, cold drops

trickling onto my belly as she squinted at the hallway, cursed
those Brits.

Each time I tugged her back:

*Did Mary spank Jesus? Why did God let soldiers shoot
at you? Who created God?*

No answers, just frowns down at me, poking lumps on her knee,
crooked
from a broken bone

never set. I should bathe that sore knee now. Feet and legs too.
But she can't smell any more.

Not ointment that gags me. Not beer bread so fresh, steam fills
the plastic bag, blurs

the price she no longer argues against. Maybe I could yank her
back with receipts
waved in the face, but I leave her,

staring at, or beyond, wisterias tangling outside the window
Rosary beads dropped
to lap, back hunched as if ready

to return to crawling. Perhaps along the soldiered fields she left
decades ago,
long before marriage and children, when people

used to pay her to read the future. That night she broke my
fever with what she called
surgical spirits, she pulled out

the Tarot and taught me such foresight. She asks me now to tell
her fortune, speak
of what's to come. Beads unstrung

and rolling down the floor; petals, vines twisting. Really I see
nothing more
than bags and receipts blowing down the street.

At Your Request

Smashing that wheezing eight track didn't help.
Neither did those voice lessons or the trips
to Nashville, looking for the Carters' home,
nights at the Grand Ole Opry. You act so
old because you are. No color under
this cowboy hat. And what should I write for
a man who doesn't know, who keeps searching
for song?

I'm sick of your stories: children
hiding their father's gun before he got
too drunk; brothers, ten and twelve, working stores,
anything for cash to buy bread, shoes and
cigarettes. But what's missing in that story?
What albatross screeches and deafens you?

Saint Jude's Nursing Home

I stole. From the stash. Roamed hallways half-baked, dressed
bed sores in a blur. Call buttons, moans, the wailing of
Alzheimer's—nothing but smoke

receding in a fog of rounds. My shoes floated along floors. Arms
worked like wands.

Behind me Martha shuffled from chair to chair, shoved

spoonfuls of puddings she slipped in her pockets during dinner
into howling

toothless mouths. And I let her. I let her crumble

meds she'd otherwise hide under her tongue, then spit
into potted plants. *Cocksuckers from the CIA* couldn't fool her
with stethoscopes.

See the bugs, she said in her smoker's voice as she pointed
to the doctor's light shining in Catherine's vacant eyes. I nodded
as she grasped

my hand, pumping it like a blood pressure gauge.

All the time glancing at Catherine, who stared back at me, or
through me,

who if she could have uttered words might have woven her own
conspiracy theories: me

a mouse hunting crumbs. Or an angel with lice infested wings.

From the Arm Chair of the Nursing Home

I worry about you, dear. Puppy dogs
on your scrubs, smiley face
on your name tag. I heard you humming
“Follow the Yellow Brick Road.”
It was you—cleaning Mrs. Schmidt’s ass
and humming. What kind of fool
would give up an emerald city
for Auntie Em, hogs and a nasty neighbor?

Serious to Do List

Quick drinking. Aimless
texting from alleyways. No pleas
to that asshole. No spewing hate-speech
targeting self. Vicadin, vespers,
voodoo dolls you'll dance
into a daze, then bury
in dirt dogs pee in. Scrub off scent—
piss scent? his scent? Black out
birthmark on his scalp, tequila bottle
tattoo, tequila-burned voice, veins
bulging, all cells still stinking
of him. Never become
the step-sister who'd slice off
her heel to fit into a glass slipper. She
gets her eyes pecked out anyway.
If you want to be blind, stuff a rocket
with every photo of self
with him. Launch it at the sun and stare
at the sky until it bursts. Prayers
of flame and fog. Amen?
Digital face turned ash—but whose?
my face?—with those
bloodshot eyes, that puppy dog drag.

Elbowed

Snatching stacks of bills from her hands, the man stumbled,
elbowed
the boy. The eyelid bruised. The boy ran, locked himself inside

the bathroom, drank Benadryl while they pretended silence.
So the boy screamed through the door *I wish a semi sliced me*

in half, then you'd feel sorry. With a pipe wrench, the boy
cracked
the window; his face in glass sparkled with cuts radiating

from the nose. A line to the ear smacked of the scar on the
father's face
but now under the mother's deep set eyes. Even in glass, shadows

rim those eyes. If only he could punch through this reflection,
kick back shards and climb out without stabs or splinters. *One*, a
voice

hollered, *two* . . . that yanking again: cords ripped from walls.
Then the
slammed door. He prayed for the father to come back while the
mother hugged

the dog like a favorite. Finally, the boy came out,
marched over, kicked them both: her in the ribs, dog in the head.

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Her own ecstasy when he tied her
to the bed, and she begged as the rope
wore at the skin of her wrists.

Did she really lap up every touch, every
word that soured her own laugh?

She scrubbed floors and tubs and crawled
around looking for loose change.

She breathed in his logic: a vapor,
a mercury leaching into veins, into
the fatty tissue that holds it in.

That smack she held in with the rising temperatures
of work, pay, poor and no time
to read. She'd become stupid, he said. And the heat
to hit him seared her silent.

Still she returned daily to the mirror he held for her.

Herself accused by that image yet ready
to swear over bibles.

But whose story did she tell? Who threatened
to leave? Was that her pounding on doors,
bills wound into fists?

And her, pleading:
a dog that doesn't even know when it's full?

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About the Author

Pamela Garvey's chapbook *Fear* (Finishing Line Press, 2008) was a finalist for the New Women's Voices Competition. Her poems and stories have been published in such journals as *Cimarron Review*, *Esquire*, *Margie*, *The North American Review*, *RATTLE*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*. Garvey, an Associate Professor of English at St. Louis Community College--Meramec, is also a past semi-finalist for the "Discovery"/*The Nation* prize. Garvey lives in the St. Louis with her husband and son and is the co-founder of Words on Purpose, a committee of socially concerned writers who organize a benefit reading series.

About the Artist

Victoria Rich is a photographer based in Brooklyn, New York. She received an MFA from Hunter College in New York City. Her work was recently featured in the 'Urban Landscape' exhibition at the Center for Fine Art Photography in Fort Collins, Colorado.

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About 2River

Since 1996, 2River has been a site of poetry and art, quarterly publishing *The 2River View* and occasionally publishing individual authors in the 2River Chapbook Series. 2River is also the home of Muddy Bank, the 2River blog.

Richard Long
2River
www.2River.org

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