
Practicing Jamie MacInnis

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PRACTICING

Jamie MacInnis

TOMBOUCTOU 1980

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SKYWRITING

Perfectly good words
without any meaning at all
can be written in the sky
by airplanes full of meaning.

They leave behind them clouds
or pictures of clouds
or the word clouds.

In China skywriting is
difficult and beautiful.
They do it in black.

CAMEL

The Arab children ride out
on camels, their magic
carpets rolled up behind.
To them the desert does not seem
unusual.

At night the moon
paralyzes the sand
and the sand becomes
cold and bluish.

The sun turns it all yellow
which is the color
we think it should be.

IMAGINARY PRAIRIE

Against the old sky the old mountains.
They looked like tall men in cowboy hats
before they invented tall men in cowboy
hats. On the other side, water to match.
A hidden radio played cowboy music.
I didn't feel alone, building a fire
whose flames were blue like my cowboy shirt.

HAND SHADOWS

When all the yellow birds came flying
into my fingers, I thought they were
roses someone didn't want, the kind
of gift an audience gives to its
favorite violinist. But I'm not
a violinist and they were not roses.
They were birds.

DUCKS FOR GROWNUPS

In the rain the white ducks
picked up or took
all the moonlight that was meant for water.
No swans were needed. Ducks
in the dark take all the light from the sky
and all the underwater light and
float between and
dare you.

640 BROADWAY

Over the tops of all the trucks,
the cars, the taxis, the people,
over the top of the noise a tiny wind
blew me some music from somebody's radio.
It was like several small pianos
thrown across the street at different speeds.
Lucky my window was already open,
for this was the music of siamese pianos.
That's what it had to be : siamese pianos,
playing themselves for me.

SMOKING IN BED

You light the fire of day
my cigarette
my face is radiant with your light.
Striking a match in the dark,
the campfire girl in me
gives me a light
and together we watch the stories
on the wall.

I learned to smoke on Pall Mall cigarettes
but now it's Lucky Strikes for me
the package so pretty
announcing its name swiftly.

THE BUDDHA

The laughing buddha
white ceramic buddha
the one with all the baby buddhas
glued to him with Chinese glue.
The baby buddhas are laughing too
and one is perched at Buddha's ear
to tell him some new joke
to keep the buddhas laughing.
These buddhas are the opposite
of Queen Elizabeth the First.

WINO

You know how it looks when the only light
in a room is coming from an open refrigerator?
Well, that's how it always looks at the wino's
garage.

"Your car ain't ready yet," he screams at
frightened customers from his cavelike
doorway. Some occult carpenter built this
wino, who is too drunk to practice magic.

"Every wino drinks too much," said the mayor's
wife to her ladies. "Martinis are different."
Thinking about winos had made the mayor's wife
into something of a philosopher. At her
"parties" people no longer played cards.

EASTER ROBINS

At 6 a.m. on Easter Sunday,
New York City, U.S.A.,
a squad of Easter robins,
hearts beating like tom-toms,
join the big parade.

The lady birds, discreetly perspiring,
arrange a tray of picnic worms;
and pretty soon the worms are singing
religious tunes of doubt and pain,
which end with a shout of triumph.
Thoughts of rebirth, resurrection,
reincarnation, fill the heart
of every worm and bird.

Swaying in unison the joyful worms
stand on their tails and sing,
"What wickedness, etc."

The march grows stately.
Row upon row of chanting robins,
many holding trays of harmonizing worms.
Tearsplitting Easter robins on parade.

SAILORS

Who knows what it's like inside the ships
that pass in the night.
The dark rooms may be darkrooms
once you turn off the light.
Do the sailors play music or
what do you hear? Do the sailors make
love to the sailors?

Inside the ships that pass in the night
the men have ocean names. They earn them
in the evenings, playing the ocean games.
Dark green
navy
white.
Who knows what it's like.

EVERY LITTLE STAR

In flat Nevada
& early California
hills do roll.

Over and over the moon
goes down, and no dawn.
Any more hills
and there's no hope
of morning.

In Reno herself
in my sorry ear you whisper
no sweet nothings.
Sometimes I wish her whole face would
disappear.

In Reno
the birds have hand-painted wings.
They float like ties
in stained air.

CAMBODIA

One of the ideas of meditation
is an end to all pain.
But as she went up in flames
the yellow nun seemed to be
screaming.

The body dies and the soul
flies out between red wings.
It reminds me of those
lapel pins.

JAZZ TO SPARE

A voice tells me there's
jazz to spare. I don't
know, it must be my own
voice.

"There's jazz to spare,"
it says, but when I listen
to the music I worry that
there's not enough to go
around.

MY GRANDFATHER

My grandfather had red
hair which I never saw him
wear, but which I wear
a version of.

I am not interested in him
I liked him he is dead. My first
funeral was his first funeral.

UNCOURTLY LOVE

Our footsteps are preserved
in dry cement.

It was wet this afternoon.
Fair play and sweet enough
you look tonight,
seeming to watch the sky.

Night and dreams
still make the shadows
that are underfoot by day.
Stare, but never gaze at
visible stars
you have no shadow now
you have
what daylight forces to the ground.

LOVE HEROES

We sleep only with those
whose misery makes them our heroes
and eat sandwiches together and
go home on opposite buses. I
didn't even know I was suffering.
Whose misery makes them our heroes

TENTH STREET

Little bird in lineament,
the sun's brilliantine makes your wings incredible.
Your feathers are mirrors for insects.
And I'm glad about the tree behind my building
tall enough to put you on its top floor
opposite my window. I will watch you, birdie
'til you catch on fire.

VALENTINES

The lower east side is full of churches.
They are like old-time valentines to god.

My next door neighbor is a widow. She goes
to mass each day with the doors in her heart
wide open. Storing up love as she sleeps,
she is an old Valentine made of black wool.

I am a bright red valentine made by myself.
East side bells are ringing, they say it is nine.

EVAPORATED MILK

Re-incarnation. To live again
as a shard of glass,
all that is left of an early
coke bottle.

My edges worn soft,
I sit in the sand
at Baker's Beach,
San Francisco, California.

LIFE UNDER GLASS

There's some kind of sunshine stored in my head.
It accumulates.

My head is a temple where schemers pray
and you are the church across the street,
addled and mysterious bells.

The world in a paperweight.

The sun pours its wisdom down on both of us.

This is life, and we bow to it from the waist,
comedy and tragedy pumpkins once removed.

AN UNPARALLELED ADVENTURE

Oh God! I've found the monster's tomb. It's all
red boxes, empty.
They've left the temple in a lemming stream.
Tonight their trails glow near my room.

Dark animals behind the fence. I'm told they
aren't armed. I'm told they're also rather gold.

This institute of animals isn't what I care for.
It was almost a dwelling, a game in a book, this mad urge
to tell you a story.

No, you read to me. I beg you. Read about the animals
we used to know. Toad Hall. Soft animals, and talkative,
as we once were.

Get me my French tin cups with flowers on them, they
are my pets. My ears! How they buzz with the tomb noise.
Three "doctors" want to operate. Are detectives
at the tomb yet? I beg you, read to me from the Book
of Childhood, here by my bed. My little bed,
that used to be my brother's.

ONE FIFTH AVENUE

Why is this hangover different from all others?
The answer is four hours sleep.
It is not a hangover yet. But stay!
I have formulated coffee and spoken on the phone.
Beginning a hangover is like beginning your third
drink while formulating your part in a conversation.
Sometime during the third drink you change brushes,
needing the broad one.
Along the bar someone on drink nine returns to a
small watercolor brush.
Someone else a lead pencil, someone else a pen.
I was watching a woman choose between two men.
Another drink was formulated down the line.
There was animation from drinks four through nine.
The woman continued to choose. I did not envy her.
The men were getting similar.

But it is morning now and I have formulated coffee
and spoken on the phone.
A spider has travelled the length of the room.
It's morning and the woman who chose is getting
smaller.
Why is this hangover different from all others.
The answer is in drinks four through nine.
May I be excused?

THE TEAM ROOM

Welcome back, team-team, you seem
ah glasslike. And those two silly girls
who know them?

Way up in the team-room, tall, fine women seat you,
a good boy's mother, comin' up. And there are cars
that murmur 'round the park. They say it's Spring,
my team-team. We will train you to play. You, in
Filmland, in a filmy negligee.

They also run, who sit at the edge and wait.
We will ask them to clean the team room, using team
shirts as bait. Under the sidewalk is blood.
You are blessed by its red, and a fine understanding
of teamwork by cops. We will ask them to play.
If they stay, they'll be slain.

THE BARRETTES OF WIMPOLE ST

The sidewalk is shaded by gracious trees
and every morning the sidewalk has on
a pair of plastic barrettes, torn
from the cardboard quickly
so there's cardboard in their teeth.

Sometimes red ones, shaped like hairbows
or palest pink of imitation fruit.
The rare yellows are like bows and
arrows.

ON THE WATERFRONT

There's a song in my heart pop pop the phone
rings I envy the ones who don't have to answer

It's a merry life, though, is it not? Three
robins harmonize on an ol' spiritual. La

la la but the truth hurts, and the truth is that I'm
pissed off! You and your High Art I spit on it.

Yet I and my love have a place by the water.
Look out this window, the water is silver,

with grey, grey gravy on top. We will rely on it
and it won't let us down. Do you hear that,

water? The answer was muffled by the shut window
but it was clear. the water said no, I hear nothin'

I'm water. I only work here. A big fish rode by and

winked. Trust this water, the wink implied,
it will carry you through.

You mean a flood? I asked. Could be, could be,
could have been the answer.

Could be something good, too, could be somet
good.

WHAT IS

a conundrum? Is it when one is confounded and thus reduced to hitting oneself, with the flat of the hand, on the forehead?

Or what about sex? Is it a form of birth control? Or is it throwing caution to the winds in a special container?

Did Wilde produce conundrums are they like flowers? Flowers, with the smell of blackened tweed. There is no progress sans a dictionary, not today, but what

is a conundrum? I ask you, what? Can it be a bonnet or the ornament on it does one wrap a chicken therein? And then, the oven. I swear, I don't know, unless...it's a wrapped Tahitian lady's dress.

TRAGIC MAGIC

"How come you look so ratty," he asked diffidently. "No makeup, stupid," I answered, holding open the door. He carried his bike in and leaned it against the wall. He was always carrying his bike.

"He only had twenty dollar bags, so I got two of them." He put the foil-wrapped 'bags' on the kitchen table. "Glass of water, please," wryly efficient, and, "Where are the works?" and, "Boy, do you need a new point. Why didn't you tell me before I went to ninth street?" And, "Where's the cotton?"

Heroin is a plot to enslave the minds of the proletariat.

This statement is always accompanied by that little drawing of two people at a kitchen table, ex- ex- ex- ex- ex- ex- ex- ex- millionaires.

ON RANDO'S BIRTHDAY

Rain on the radio. Criminals
of the north send greetings by phone
and lost bats flutter in the courtyard,
their nights governed by nostalgia.
The smoke of a thousand campfires is thought of
and forgotten. A man with long, wet hair waits
by the radiator.

Dark transfers of weather have twisted this day,
and infinite rain pours on this birthday
of raindrops. A Japanese doll sings in the
howling bookcase. Lost bats spin
into the shape of a black umbrella.

FANTA

What kind of drink is this?
My Fanta.
I drink to you as I drink you,
deepest Orange Soda made today.
I toast you with your bottle
excellent in itself
and clear glass
through which I see and wonder at
the richness and the cheapness of
dark summer color. No return
is embossed, no deposit.

WHAT I WEAR

I see what I'm wearing. Red accents.
My haircut is from the Dutch Boy
paint ad.

In the bank a Black boy told me
my haircut was authentic. He had an
Afro.

The bank teller, a woman, looks
just like Jonathan Winters,
that's how she wears *her* hair. You
realize everyone is famous.

NOT FADE AWAY

Cooper Union after dark.
I'm looking for a way to mention it.
Remember jacket head?
Who does he think he's not?
Remember the rewards of staying indoors
on a sunny day?
The sound of children in the courtyard
beating each other up.
Remember Cooper Union after dark?
The skylights lighting up the sky.

Remember driving back from Maine?
Your brother's hated rug?
and the fall of night last fall
on East River Drive?
Remember the moon over Imperial Envelope?
Teenagers playing basketball along the river.
Remember the music emanating from the cables?
Shine on, car radio. My thoughts shine
on the years spent getting rid of everything.

SEN-SEN

Slow folk, kissing in public,
show a human tendency to love.
Sen-Sen, if there's a man
using my blue pen, do I reserve
the right to interview? A fishy taste
of cat's breath hangs in the air,
and Lilacs age in a brown jar.

The peaceful way young girls eat chocolate
in front of buildings, maple trimmed.
Their beaux await them. They will drive away
in caravans of ancient Chevrolets.

The arcane trousers of the rather young
(you wear them). Arrggghhhh, Spring! and if a
tree falls on us, as we walk in the woods outside Boston,
let its blossoms cover us let us hide in the fumes.
Lie down. Without question you may borrow my blue pen.

JIM & EDITH

sit at a table
with friends. Her cigarette
smoke curls in his half-closed
eyes as though smoke were the
intoxicant here.

I love this nightclub photo
taken by a camera girl.
It shows them
as they saw
themselves:
independent operators.

Surrounded by a group of "in-coolies"
impeccably staring inward
eyes white as diapers.

Utter partygoers without gossip,
they like to dance. They like to insert
a joke. They like to smoke.
A picture of natives, one carries
the other in her arms.

CHINESE MODERN

ney Toler with his
Confucian deductions
I pagoda eyebrows
gave us Charlie Chan
the way Olivier gave us
Hamlet.
an was a famous detective
who showed his son
ropes.
"Someday, my son, all these
things will be yours."
Opulent hotel lobbies,
formous conga lines, nylon
stockings, easy
rivers, Florida.
Chinese modern.

IRISH MUSICIAN

The train starts by accident
leaving Washington D.C.
A flowered kimono lies wrinkled in my canvas
The rays go dim as I travel east
out of your frequency.
You are like me
You admire people who like you.
I read your book
The Beautiful Indifference
looking for clues.

The train starts by accident,
stopping in Newark.
Here, there's a neighborhood,
Down Neck,
where people have grape arbors in their yards
next to ivy-walled factories.
Old Newark.
A man with a banjo sits in a chair.

The train starts by accident.
Big flowers.
A businessman tells me his story.
The train tells its story of people
having a drink at 80 miles per hour.
The factories go by telling their stories
in billboards and a hundred tiny windows
talking at once.

DRY SHAMPOO

I was nineteen, no longer living "at home", a terrible snob. My parents cordially invited me to dinner, one evening, to meet the poet, Carl Sandburg, who was staying with them. Sandburg's kind of fame irritated me, but I condescended to attend. Sandburg turned out to be an incredibly handsome man, with thick white hair, and a bitter folksiness that suited me fine, though he hardly spoke to me. Finally, I asked him something about his writing method — embarrassingly — and he replied that he never washed his hair with soap and water; only dry shampoo.

BOO HOO, MY LOVE

This March day has my own fitful brightness,
the sky suggesting an upset person pacing back
and forth across a room,
obscuring the light source repeatedly.
They're playing "96 Tears". Listen,
someone's excitable telephone.

They're playing "Angel Eyes".
My power is all around me and under the rug
and I'm in love with your autobiography.

I used to love parties, I followed them everywhere
in a state of grace. Listen.
Ten years will go by in abject silence,
but first they play "Boo Hoo, My Love"
to lighten the decade.

SLEEP

A man is sleeping.
Look at his face. His eyes
are not quite closed.
Come closer.
Jesus! How can he sleep?
There's a rampaging gorilla
behind his eyes!
The gorilla lurches forward.
He grabs the bars of his cage
and shakes them, glaring out
through the sleepers eyelids.
The man will not wake up.
The gorilla sits down in despair.
It's quiet everywhere.

WEDDING POEM

When it happens,
marriage is everything.

Everyone knows that Carol
is beautiful and smart.

Everyone knows that Steve
is beautiful and smart.

We admit secretly that this is
important.

And we are glad that marriage
is not democratic.

We only see this marriage of
two people, beautiful and smart,

And larger than life, right now,
and about to resume at normal size.

This weekend they loom large.
I see Steve in leather jacket

And clogs,
and Carol in boheme sandals

Eating wonderful meals,
swimming,
talking at a small table.

They are bathed in a light that
pre-electric.

for Steve and Carol

Dear friend, I know you're sick of me
 remote as in valium
 almost really angry.
 Certain nights you find me in the "other room"
 with the death aura on me.
 Am I what I am the way a person limps
 into accountancy, a case of
 post-dated self-love? But dope aside
 our friendship is as good as any
 on the eastern seaboard.

Once in California there was such a friendship
 overruled by natural disaster and put away
 for later.
 Later, there's the me who loves you, dope aside.
 That me despairs at your despair
 and disapproval, and disappears.

For a while, I had a magical interest in going to Mass.
 I would go at six o'clock, leaving the house in the exciting
 darkness of November mornings.

I was a student at the Convent, then, and the nun I loved
 was Mother Lowry. I had even discovered her name: Clair

Her brother, and this is the insane part, was the priest
 at Saint Vincent de Paul, where I'd attend these Holy Masse
 just to look at Father Lowry's hair. In looking at Father
 Lowry's hair I could imagine the hair of his sister, which
 was covered by the black veil and pleated, white coif of her
 nun's habit. There was only her face, small and glamourou
 and her bony hands.

After six o'clock mass in the golden church, I'd have hot
 chocolate in a shop, and walk to the Convent. Mother Low
 would be there, ready to teach us girls' basketball, at which
 I excelled.

SCIENCE

Locating the Soul

Maybe it moves from place to place
igniting your eyes for a second,
then hopping onto someone's shoulder
as the light falls from your face.
A sponge with small wings,
it can live in a tree.

Big Love

Do you realize how fame works?
It predates the world's recognition.
It exists in people as the soul does,
non-medical and odorless.

The Fluid of Fate

Heroin gives you its dreams
and takes yours away
in a crocodile bag.
We are the headwaiters of the Nile,
if you take my meaning.
Our tears are those of the mighty crocodile.

Monster on Campus

I like it when the monster
still has on his everyday clothes.
Like the white jacket
the young doctor wore
when he ingested the fluid of fate.

Rays

TV can be sweet
if it's not pointing at you.
Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches
lit from within.

RICHARD

Last night I slept in a boy's
parent's bed. This boy was in there with me.
Fluffy quilt.

I have an endless adult past.
I know two guys named Richard.
One of them I call "this boy".

This boy weighs 130.

He is 18. I wink at myself in the mirror
as if I were kidding. Tomorrow this boy
will drive out of my thoughts.

My thoughts. Ahem. They make me cough.
The cough.

Now there is only one Richard
and he will be gone before long.

HOUSE AND GARDEN

It seems I spent my childhood
in the Presidio and backyard,
picking lilies in the dark.
Martha in her white uniform and I
in my kid's uniform of white tee
and jeans, going home with armloads.
In the tree fort I kept a pink hair-
brush and a hand mirror. My velvet
doll was old enough to be my mother.
Inside my life there was me,
digging my way to China, guided by
my mother's finger of light. The years
were a long, white day, the nights
as narrow as a child's bed.

MARSEILLE

I saw four junkies on the street today.
They were strangers but I knew them,
wanted them to take me along.
My lips drew back from my teeth.
How do they shoot their dope in Paris?
In Marseille? In New York anymore?

The men who make the wind
are knocking at my window. There's a
grinning face on the fire-escape, lit
from within by a candle.
The candle has one eye. Imagine
a bonfire. A bonfire has six rooms.
I wish the mayor would give me
the key to some other city.

CHANGING CAT

She is black with long white
gloves, and there is little
outside of books and mirrors
that she doesn't see into.
Sometimes her ears are like
bonnets and her eyes
yellow garnet. Navajos call magic creatures "changing".
It means they come in parts.
When I see spilling ink
in my house, out of no bottle,
it is always changing cat.

THE BEAUTIFUL POEM

begins on my birthday.
I get some perfume
and there's no way
to put it here. Also
Rudofsky's book of
covered sidewalks where
my perfume belongs.
A watercolor from Bill
shows Bill with a candle
looking in a mirror
at the portrait of a woman.
The perfume is here, too.
The New Yorker will be mailed
to me every week for a year
thanks to Larry, and in it
my perfume is advertised.
The new year is shining on the table.

COLORS GLASS

A blue paradox resides beside the lake. What
do I mean by that, exactly? The blue represents
the hothouse flowers, planted years ago, in a
plot the size of a pier-glass.
The artist putters there.

The paradox is difficult to ascertain. I mean
it's not a paradox when someone plants a flowerbed to
match a lake, say.
The paradox is hidden, maybe, yonder underground,
where farmers buried bottles in the bottles' youth.

As if at sea, the farmers wrote their messages in ink
as dark as life beneath a flowerbed.
They put their thoughts in bottles,
and mailed them in the earth. A mob of thought, a
paradox, my blue idea of a blue idea of a farmer after dark

MUSIC

I believe in Smokey Robinson. and Fats
Domino? Fats too. His "wind in the pillow-
case." And there's an alphabet of Zoot Sims.
Many stay up all night, singing.

The El was an influence on these men; that, and
the river, with its bridges getting smaller as
you go north. There's a green bridge, just for looks.
Narrow and suave as an evening shadow, it could be
covered at night with an evening glove. Didn't
musicians flock to the bridges?

It's a big night of stars on the radio.
A school of singers listens. I follow the man who
stands beside a burning Christmas tree, singing
Kiss of Fire.

REAR WINDOW

I swear by music, it was an idea of a summer night.
A tenant played rhapsodic piano for the tenements.
I was a perfect audience, pretending to sleep
under open windows, and Victor,
sleeping for real, laid music on his dreams.

I sat like the north shadows, deja
deja vu, waiting for news.
The dream is everywhere in dots
of red and blue on black,
and cables pulling elevators everywhere.

Even the city's endless piles of skulls
are standing in for life. In the morning,
a block of light on the fire-escape
is solid as a person,
and real as the sleep we are gone in a dream of.



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