

Air Travel

Clarinda Harriss



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Air Travel

for Collin, Emily, Julia, Liam and Nathan

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The Bone Tree

The Night Parrot

License Renewal for the Blind

When Divas Dance

with Chezia Thompson Cager and Kendra Kopelke

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“Tragedy of Hats” was *Poetry*’s “Poem of the Week” in the month of its publication. “Aerlingus” won the 2001 Donn Goodwin Award. “Adam Forgets” won first place in *Pagitica*’s 2003 competition.

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The insert images were reproduced with permission of the Musee d’Orsay (Millet) and The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (van Gogh).

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Air Travel

I. Western Air Lane

O raucous crow, who will you call
when your children all have flown?
Night! Let the black that lights your feathers
guide my flying children home.

II. Holding Pattern

An arriving passenger drops The Orlando Times
on a seat in Charlotte. A departing passenger
picks it up. On her way to O'Hare turning
to the Family Pages, she (startled) releases to the windy city
six cut-out newsprint stars the size of a child's hand.

Will this be the flight that claims me as baggage?

A plane crosses a whole continent with pilot and passengers
frozen dead. Another plane flies around in circles
because it's snowing somewhere. Another plane bobs
through a sky that's sunlit and thunderclouded
like bad religious art. The one still thing
is a solemn child coloring with a blue crayon.

Black holes hold flying crayons of all colors.

Me, I'm stuck in a holding pattern over Philadelphia.
I'd rather be in Baltimore but I can lie back on
any rough-trade wind that tries to smack me around
and laugh. So the Summer of Nothing's coming,
two-oh-oh-oh, *triple* nothing, thirty-some years after
the Summer of Love. Still love's in the air. I can
feel it flying around like sweat off a dancer.

The wind's swept my place clear and clean.

Degas was wrong. His gallopers arc through air
with all four hooves flung to all four winds.

Freeze frames came along and explained
a horse is airborne only when all four hooves
bunch under him. Almost as if he's kneeling.
Kneeling on tough nothing.

III. Mirror

In line at the coffin-size head
I see a girl
watching me fix my lipstick.
I watch her
watch me in a corner of my little
powdery mirror.

She's the age when I used to
think
"As if anybody looks at them."
Still, she's ever
ever so slightly moving her lips
in sync.

IV. CRASH VICTIM SEES ART, JESUS

Gossonne, Jul. 26: Waiting to die while the flaming plane crashes, a passenger sees framed in his window a landscape that reminds him of a painting. There are bright hilly fields, a steep roof, and a tiny animal. In a second he can see it's a horse, and in an another second that the horse is pulling a plow with a tiny man guiding them. A plow! It's France in the year 2000. The passenger thinks the painting is by either Millet or Van Gogh. This is something that could be checked out on the Internet sometime. He wants to jot down a note. He feels intensely irritated that he has no pen or pad. As the window blackens with smoke and oil, he thinks: So this is the crap people think about when they're about to die.

This is the passenger the people who sifted through the wreckage kept talking about on television. They thought he must have seen Jesus. There was something like a smile on his ruined face.

*



Les Glaneuses
(*The Gleaners*)

Jean Millet
Oil on canvas, 1857
Musée d'Orsay



Paysage avec une maison et un laboureur
(*Landscape with House and Ploughman*)

Vincent van Gogh
Oil on canvas, 1889
The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

Surfing the early morning TV channels from her bed, a woman sees a scene that reminds her of Millet's *The Gleaners*. People in dark, bulky clothes stoop to pick through a flame-yellow field under a gentian sky. The Concorde has just crashed and burned there. The woman rushes to her computer naked to check out the scene.

<http://www.postershop.com/Millet-Jean/Millet-Jean/Aehrenleserinnen-2601865.html>
Les Glaneuses, Millet, 1857, Musee d'Orsay, Paris

It's Millet's *The Gleaners* all right, but the colors on the TV screen were Van Gogh colors. She types in "Van Gogh With Pictures." She finds thumbnails of many Van Gogh studies of Millet, but none of *The Gleaners*. She wonders if she only imagined those colors, or if it was a different Van Gogh picture, maybe *Rest from Work*. She clicks on that one.

<http://metalab.unc.edu/wm/paint/auth/gogh/millet/gogh.rest-work.jpg>
Noon: Rest from Work (After Millet) 1889-90, Musee d'Orsay, Paris

The thickly sleeping boy and girl are too whole and the haystack too unblown to be what the wreck-pickers saw. The last thumbnail, a picture she doesn't recall ever seeing before, is titled *Landscape with House and Ploughman*.

http://metalab.unc.edu/wm/paint/auth/gogh/landscapes/Paysage_avec_une_maison_et_un_laboureur, October 1889, *Landscape with House and Ploughman*; Oil on canvas; The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, No. 3KP 562. Formerly collection Otto Krebs, Holzdorf. *As far as I can tell from the catalog, this work has never been previously exhibited.* – Mark Harden

There are bright hilly fields, a steep roof, and a tiny animal. A closer look reveals that it's a horse pulling a plow, with a tiny man guiding them.

This program has performed an illegal inactivity and will be shut down.

V. Aerlingus

What we fear at the edge is not the fall
but the long haul back, the smothering suck
of the soft, safe center. We know we'd kill
Robert, the tourist from Aquitaine who must poke
his rolled umbrella into Moher's westmost rock
where it juts bare into salty sky, with one yell

of warning. Ourselves near edge, we stare
as he waves his new Irish cap, calling
his wife and grown-up sons to follow where
the signs warn DANGER. CLIFF STILL FALLING.
They graze like Achill sheep, insouciant, sure.
Hand in hand we stroll close as we dare

to the sheer drop, the gnashing ocean. We're safe
on this slim green path that keeps us straight,
not too far inland yet not quite off
the land. We sway to a distant busker's slight
sweet music. It's when the sea's out of sight
we (starved for ozone) catch the bitter whiff

of fear in each other's hair and skin.
Home among the States it's hard to hold belief
in tundra shelves that drop to tropics, or in
the primrose and dolman dotted coasts of love.
We tense to the tug of thick familiar ground.
Our knuckles whiten as the plane puts down.

VI. Flying Over Tiny Ponds and Mountains

Notice how
clouds waver like smoke from something burning
some pyre or bonfire
built on a grander scale than the baby landscape—
a stove maybe
for larger dolls than the tiny people
in the plane.

Ponder scale,
how ant stale's less shit-like than cow dung,
and smeared
on a windshield a bug's less disgusting than a bird.
How hard it is
to see a soul in one month's bloody conceptus
swirling down. . .

And how we admire
big hands doing tiny things, lasering veins or
fastening pearls
among the tiny damp hairs at a slender nape.
Playing sixteenth notes
on a piccolo, flute or violin. Simply not breaking
the dolls' tiny teacups.
Consider perspective,
how potent its hocus-pocus, how even if
we were together
rather than fifty thousand vertical feet apart
each of us, love,
by squinting one eye and holding up one thumb
could make the other

disappear.

VII. Poetry Is What Fish Won't Eat

*"The Irish memorized poetry before a voyage. In case of shipwreck,
poetry in their bellies would keep fish from devouring them."*

— Esiaba Irobi

Poetry has become useful again. It
Is front page news. We do
What we can to explain a world where soon
Fish and loaves—always far too few—
Won't feed new multitudes doomed to
Eat bitterness morning, noon and night.

Eating in cities becomes rest & recreation.
Fish, raw, gorgeously slivered; black beef;
Poetry-crafted salads; fine Chateau-Neuf
Won't keep our minds off terror or grief,
Is, nevertheless, a distraction from the question
"What could we have done?"

What would have kept the death-planes hanging
Fishlike in their clear blue tanks of sky
Eating the miles between space and time?
Won't some big voice say what in the bloody world
Is the prayer, spell, rhyme,
Poetry we should be chanting?

Poetry is what the fish won't eat.
Is what the ancient Irish learned by heart,
What they carried in their stomachs.
Fish flashing silver behind the eyes of the starved
Won't fill like potatoes or good brown brack.
Eat for another hunger. Take. This is my Body. Eat.

Dog Stories

owl
bull
can't
smile

bad luck
to young?
wrong
wrong

bull
love
owl
all small

Bull gone
all
but smell
in rug

and paw-
fall
in dark
hall

or owl's
low
growl
soft

soft soft soft soft

Union Memorial Hospital

Packed with naked bodies in every posture
of abandon, this must be the most
antisexual place in the world tonight,
this wheezing, dozing hospital
where every half-open door reveals
a waxen homunculus in a bed
that resembles a torture instrument
or a significant other strewn over
a reclining chair like discarded clothes.
Awful holes emitting snores or apparatus.
Worst, the parodies of veins suspended
in clear plastic tubing from above
while parodies of bowels gnarl around bedlegs.
I walk the halls dragging a yellow bag.

A persistent friction, the tug of a tube
scotchtaped to my crotch

must, therefore, explain why
in this Temple of Anaphrodisia I
find I'm counting myself to sleep
with old lovers' names, counting how many
love positions the mechanical
bed could twist a body into
by the right touch
of the Head Foot Up Down buttons,
finally counting the fluorescent stars
in the sexy downtown skyline—
having thrown the drapes back from
the wall-size window in my room
to give the whole city a wink at
my backless nightgown.

At Camden Yards

He: Look at that woman over there.
Who'd wear an outfit like that to a baseball game!

She: Satin top, teeny pleated skirt—
like my old ballet school's costumes.
Long fine bones, wide painted eyes—
she could be a dancer—

He: Look down there. ED-DY! ED-DY!
Murray's going to hit his 500th home run.
There it goes! Yes!

She: What's she got, a tiny video cam?
No, a regular camera so ancient
it's a fat black box with a kind of nozzle.

He: Why doesn't that bitch sit down.
Goddam confetti. Look at the mess on the field.

She: Thousands of gold paper streamers shine
brighter than the strange grass
in this unnatural light. Look! the grounds
crew is trying to pick them up one by one.

He: Why doesn't that bitch sit down.
Doesn't she know she's blocking the view?
Doesn't she know the wind is about to
blow that little skirt up over her ass?

Me: Look how adoringly her husband throws his arms
around her thighs to protect her modesty
while she snaps that perfect picture.
Such a parade of conditions I can never aspire to.