

Newer Poems (uncollected)

Numbed

Any sensation I could want
lies at my fingertips. I slide tapes
into the machine; lose myself in the flutter
of waves. In one film, a woman
strips, crosses to a chair, hangs herself.

In another, a man's hand runs a razor
down and up the strop, then
pries open the lid of someone's eye.
The razor slides across it, bisecting the pupil.
I rewind and watch this again.

I will only look away for something better,
and when the high voices of children rise
like chimes in the street, I walk outside.
A boy lies there, begging the air for help.
Three bullies kick rhythms on his chest.

After dinner, I hold my fingers over
the blue blossom of gas. They hover there,
unmoving, each a moth to light.
Soon, everything numbs. The pain
spirals away. It is not what matters.

The Rabbit Butcher

My father kept a wooden hammer
beside the bins of oats and alfalfa pellets
out there behind the chickenwire hutches.
He'd snare the rabbits' scrabbling hind feet,
dangle them upended, relishing, pausing,
at last shattering their skulls. Once.
Twice. Sometimes, mistakenly, I thought
I heard them scream. Of course they weren't
dead, not yet--he had coiled rope
over the woodshed doorway, and here
he strung them drooling blood,
again upsidedown, the eyes paling,
the brain matter oozing from the black

triton motionlessness of the nose.
He flayed them with his knife,
one bucket clumped with their coats,
another puddled with trembling azure guts,
a third with the delicate muscle
my mother would serve Sunday dinner.

Do not think these details
serve to revere or condone
the butcher: it's not only the *good*,
the *kind*, the *cherished*, that warrant
description, not only *saintly* and *sweet*
winning the eye, the lingering
ear, with their particulars.
My sister and I were little children.
Each spring, we named these rabbits.
If asked, I could further describe
the hammer, the woodshed,
the rabbits themselves--
the breeder, brindle-gray, kept for years;
or the New Zealand white, its rapt albino eye
a garnet nuggeted in snow--
but perhaps the real challenge here
is my father's silence: the antisound
eating those years, fire which very nearly
annihilated us. *Reticence*,
I could call it. *Muffledness*, maybe;
aphony; a *quiet neglect*
Or, too, his *dead silence*--
his *rabbit's silence*--

which now, even all these years,
still are only words,
all the detail and description I can give.

Hundreds of Murders

It happened the summer I fell in love
with terror. One year shy of my first job,
my bedroom and haircut a mess, my face
attempting a first mustache. Evenings
I spent centered between A/C and VCR,
ice crescents melting a slow waltz
in my water glass. *Shadowy figure leaps*
from white curtain, bludgeoning victim
with poker. Victim's head slams
against fireplace mantel, then desk

(breaking front teeth). Figure plunges machete into victim's neck ("Deep Red").

My favorite director was Dario Argento, the Italian horror maestro whose films sat in bent-cornered Blockbuster boxes, their fluorescent RATED R stickers beckoning, begging me to rent.

"Heavy on style, low on substance," said the critics who bothered reviewing. *Victim falls into roomful of barbed wire. Struggling and extensively cut, victim attempts to leave but has throat slit by killer's razor ("Suspiria").* My mother rearranged furniture one 100 degree weekend, television pushed beside the bay window that faced the street. While I watched movies I'd see him watering his perennials, opening his zebra-striped mailbox, staring gimlet-eyed toward our house. *Killer stabs victim's boyfriend, knife entering bottom of jaw and leaving through screaming mouth. Victim is forced to watch, thanks to device killer has constructed: row of needles, taped against victim's eyes. If she closes her eyes, needles will rip eyelids apart ("Opera").* And yes, I kept returning. I counted the three hundred forty-three steps to his house. Sometimes more, often less. He gave me twenty dollars each time. I said no, I didn't want him to fuck me, but he gave me twenty dollars. *Killer bludgeons man with ceramic vase, slamming it into his face again and again until man spits blood on camera lens. Killer then twists wire around man's neck, cutting through skin. Finally he suffocates ("Four Flies on Grey Velvet").* My bedroom smothered me--all beds were the same now--and nights I dozed on the sofa, still stoned from his drugs, TV my gluey company. I stashed my money and waited. Once my mother questioned a bruise. I didn't answer. *Gnarled hands pull victim's head back onto windowsill. Hands hammer head against exposed nails. One hand keeps head pinioned, while another jams broken edge of window glass down, chopping victim's neck to create "guillotine" effect ("Inferno").* He preferred me on all fours. He supported his weight

on one imperial knee behind me, bedroom
floor, beside the fireplace. "Take it
deep." He'd polished his pokers
and cinder shovels, and when pain
crinkled like foil behind my eyes
I shut them, imagining those weapons
slamming into his skull, again,
again, rupturing his flesh, his blood freckling
the oak logs, bits of brain
coated with ash. *When victim peeks
through keyhole, murderer positions gun barrel
and blasts a bullet through her eye,
out the back of her head ("Opera").*
Back home, I aimed the remote
and replayed my favorite deaths. Red
and blue fireflies through rooms. I locked
doors; curtained windows. When I shit
I shut the bathroom door, blocking out
the movie's light. In the dark I couldn't see
the toilet, stippled and stained
with my blood. *Victim screams as knife
torpedoes chest. Rope is lassoed
around victim's body, which will later
serve as noose to break victim's neck
when body crashes stained-glass ceiling.
But prior to that, killer stabs victim's chest
again and again, exposing the final beats
of victim's heart ("Suspiria").*

The Death of Anthony Perkins

White porcelain, silver chrome. For the third time that
day, I lingered under needles of scalding water. My mother
pounded on the bathroom door. I was ten years old, on
summer vacation at the Cincinnati Motel 6. I lathered up
with suds from the tiny soap wrapped like fragrant white
chocolate bars. Then I masturbated. In fantasies, my
adolescent form was replaced by Janet Leigh's from *Psycho*.
Norman Bates entered. The cloudy curtain ripped back. He
dropped his knife and swept me into his chilly arms.

Horrified audiences squirm through the now-famous shower
scene: Bernard Herrmann's screechy violin; the crescendo of
knife as it penetrates muscle. The cinematic murder lasts a
total of forty-five seconds, but "seems like an eternity,"
according to the lady in the aisle seat.

Purportedly informed of his hospital blood test by a secret source, the *National Enquirer* reported Anthony Perkins was HIV positive. In a cover photo, he stands with his wife, his arm hugging her shoulder, veins visible on his wrists.

Dinner With Norman
(poem I wrote, age 21)

Ring, ring. You sandwich the phone between ear and shoulder. He whispers invitation, his voice surfacing from a connection that crackles like the curlicues of bacon you cover to hear him better. His words soothe like a mother's touch. You shower now to avoid it later. Greenbacks into socks and an underwear change: anticipating accident on that desert road. Across town, you plunk down a few twenties; cruise off top-down in a '50s sedan. The drive lasts two days. Heat and gritty wind. Shoddy motels lacking the quiet and persnickety spic-and-span of the Bates. Later, saguaros and yuccas pose like sinister statues in the sand's bland gallery. Your chug-chugging arrival seems filmic and deliberate: the VACANCY sign sizzles its neon wire in perfect synch with ravens that flap across the sunset. A coyote bawls. You sidestep Suites One through Ten and make a beeline for the house. Norm's mom relaxes in her upstairs window, silhouette not-rocking in the rocking chair. Front porch: creaky and freshly swept. Front door: creaky and unlocked. Stuffed swallows, budgies, and a great snowy owl follow your every move. Industrious N's preserved their shapes with chemicals and sawdust. Smells like these creep toward your nose, combined with those cheese sandwiches he modestly hinted he'd serve. Your heart pitter-patters. Somewhere upstairs, a floorboard snaps like a backbone. You touch the antique banister; begin the ascent.

Martin Balsam, who starred as Detective Arbogast: "Tony was ideal to work with. He was punctual, kind, a real professional. At that time, the role of Norman would have been risky for his career--Tony was a teen idol of sorts, and there he was playing a transvestite murderer. But the risk paid off, and the movie made him famous."

Coincidences. (1) For three years, my mother and I lived in a mansion-sized house on a hill. (2) Nights, she sat crocheting in her high-backed rocker. (3) We both adored toasted cheddar sandwiches. (4) As a kid, I attempted

taxidermy, gutting a dead bird and stuffing it with pebbles.
(5) I dressed as Mom one Halloween.

My attractions always center on dark attributes: hair, eyes, and bushy brows that connect above the nose. My "type"'s hard to find on the street, subway, or office, so I look to the silver screen. Anthony Perkins possessed all these qualities. Even when the gray began snowing his temples, I found him sexy.

". . .destroys the victim's healthy cells. . ."
". . .cannot escape from the attacker. . ."
". . .the killer is difficult to detect. . ."
--lines from a hospital brochure

Psycho II, made two decades after the original, paled in comparison. The year was 1983, and I'd just joined "Skin Slaughter," my first punk band. The lead singer and I lounged in the front row, drugs simmering in our arteries and veins, our dyed haircut spikes silhouetted on the screen. In the only scene I remember, Vera Miles snooped through the Bates basement, only to meet her doom from a knife that bullseyed her screaming mouth.

The final shot of *Psycho*. Insect lands on Norman's hand. "Mother"'s voice cackles, "I wouldn't even harm a fly." Hitchcock superimposes a grinning skull over Norman's face.

Pneumocystis carinii killed a friend of a friend, only one day after A.P.'s death. "AIDS related illness," said page 37 of the paper. I'd just read the same words thirty-four pages back. In the Perkins article, a photo showed Norman Bates discovering Marion Crane's body. When we left the funeral home, the clouds resembled taxidermied birds. I asked Kevin if his place had vacancy. We crawled into bed and held hands. I slid my bootlegged copy of *Psycho* into the VCR. I wondered how many times his friend had seen it. At last count, my total was fifty-seven.

The Death of Vincent Price

Of course the dark must fall.

The butcherknife missing from the rack,
black mudtracks, fresh, on the stairs.

Noises from the wall no longer explained as mice;
the storm unfurling whips of light;
thunderpeals stifling a voice from the hall.

Tonight there's no escape from Vincent,
ha ha ha, each film strung in tribute,
unsplintered bloodsoaked totem.

Always the murderers we loved,
my sister and I, swooning
in their dazzling mesmerist's eyes.

In the next room our parents fought: *Wish
you were dead*. Elbows to floor, faces balanced
on hands, we watched him ferry us away.

As Dr. Phibes, Vincent bolted his victim
in bed, his wrists cranking a mammoth vise:
squeezed dead. Bloodlettings. Poisonings.

Locusts gnawed at flesh; saws divided men
in triplicate; swords catapulted through rooms
to bullseye victims' hearts. We applauded

and anticipated next Friday's fright:
*Diary of a Madman, Theatre of Blood,
Scream and Scream Again*.

Tonight I am *here*. My sister *there*.
I sleep on my side, beat and bloodbeat
hammering my ear to the pillow.

And turning I hear, this room, another heart:
not mother's half-folded with disease,
not father's overfuddled by drink.

Please Vincent, we'd say. *Come rescue us*.
From the closet, a rustle of hangers.
The phone lines slashed like little wrists.

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