High anxiety

Andy Plante
Colby College

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HIGH ANXIETY

by

Andy Plante

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Senior Scholars Program.

Colby College

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APPROVED BY:

TUTOR

D.M. Clockshaw

CHAIRMAN, DEPARTMENT OF

English

READER

Peter Harris

CHAIRMAN, COMMITTEE ON SENIOR SCHOLARS
FISHING HOLIDAY

The minnow in shock
as I push the hook
through his back.

The blonde boy grinning
as my fingers move.

And also, in my palm,
the fattest worm
will soon be dancing.

May, it's simple
to cross through woods
with a boy and a line
to a pond
laquered with sun.

A peaceful wait
for a fish to clean,
to behead
and split in two.

No tension.
We lean back
and talk now and then
about nothing.
AN OLD MANDOLIN

The fingerprints of lovers in 1920
stick to the belly.
They can't be wiped away.
Neither can the two cracks
running down the face
like false tears.
Still, it sings well,
rich as the voice
of the frail
church soprano,
a woman whose powder and clothing
leave her past untraced.
FOR DAVE

We sit among bare birches
in the absence
of familiar faces.
We think we need
only this maze of leaves
to wander along,
to lose ourselves.
The dissimilar patterns,
gradations of yellow:
they ask no questions,
point no directions,
they whisper
no sentences
as the evening wind
approaches, stirring them.
Days growing shorter,
we consider a crow,
disappearing speck,
and the hermit
losing his speech.
The way she threw the ball
she feared male hormones were starting
to predominate. The sun falling
in and out of low clouds,
but she didn't notice it as beautiful.
Likewise she could tell nothing
of the attraction of her blush.
Maybe when she dropped the ball in a puddle
she felt older, more mature, and could imagine
a trustworthy hand possibly inching its way
along her thigh. The trepidation
a city girl feels, alone
at night in a huge field,
and rumblings of thunder in the distance.
The plains of North Dakota have no direction. Consequently the daughters of wheat farmers have no reason to move.

Therefore no one knows how to dance or swim. The water holes dry up.

* 

Father pacing in the dust-square of the yard, head bent, memorizing heritage: dates and monuments playing hopscotch within the confines of his skull.

* 

A clan spreading lengthwise like the fields year to year. Each April five more identical shoots per acre. They speak the same dialect, according to wind and rain.

* 

Meanwhile, tumbleweeds hesitate, then unravel zig-zags over the flat: strange tangles of stems, twisted and cursed to pass on, to wander as aliens.
FIRST ACT

Allow me to introduce silence.

The rain stops dropping on maple leaves. The place reissues nothing. The solitary note of a chickadee moves to a crowded neighborhood.

Night blackens the trees in again. You can't hear the bats screaming either.

Allow my hands to clench my head.

Coma of mime gestures, a man in whiteface depicting pain.
SECOND ACT

We starred in a poor flick.  
The director said, smile slowly. 

Old women in the audience wept  
as we parted, as we contemplated  
fake fields and lakes, alone.  
The writer said we had to kill ourselves. 

Shiny pistol. Blue barrel, white room,  
a small weight in your hand. 

There: the smoke spiraled  
perpendicular to your body. 

I entered, took the gun, brought it to my mouth...  
let it fall. The director said,  

smile slowly, raise it again,  
even laugh as you squeeze the trigger.
LITTLE SHEPHERD BOY

Another son of shepherds, he strummed a mandolin on a scarred hill. Below, the goats played idiotic games. Boulders pointed in four directions.

His impoverished father, the filthy bastard, had left him with no one but the animals to hate.

Older, he could escape their dung and the summer mornings when cold made swirling clouds and olives froze on the branches.

Free, he could smash the mandolin like an egg. He could set fire to the shambles of a hut his father tried to build in another valley of rocks and bushes.
BIRTH

We were born together
in a hotel room
we chose together:
  a dim white box,
fumbled gestures.

When we opened our eyes
to start the day
we rose
in consecutive order
to use the little sink
and the little toilet
which roared twice.

Walking outside
into the stiff city wind
we decided
to cling to each other--

and why not?
Who could stop us?
MATING PROCEDURE

In a field turning green
the robins, squared off.
A dull-colored maiden watching
from the edge of the woods.
They circle cautiously.
Impossible to tell what trick
each has on his mind.
They recognize detailed schemes
everything could be plotting,
so that the sun
does not lie peacefully
on a bent blade of grass,
but happens to be out
igniting the breasts in the scenery.
A MAN

Wildflowers left at her door, now on a small table in the living room. She may see them once or twice each day before they pale and disappear; leaf and petal colors draining into the air, blue dust from chicory. The thin bodies and blossoms become the uniform shade of fields before winter and snowfall. Once flurries purify the landscape, memory leaves, and a man is unknown.
WILLIAM CYR

He would not take no
for an answer when he drank-- but
at work he shod
the horses of ladies and wild men.
The cutting of their figures
across the skyline.
Then night dropped again,
a worn black blanket.
The tavern windows approached.
He stared
at the eye gazing up
from the whiskey's still surface.
On weekends that eye did not move,
locked in his room.
Once he might be leaning
against a streetlamp, giggling.
But in the presence of hammers
he lifted tons shyly.
Since the plant does not talk, we must be wary.
Description: a single green blade, small dagger rising out of a harmless pot; if the jailer moves too near the bars, the prisoner may lose his good reputation. At a certain distance, then, let us state our acceptance. Let us confer blessings on those deserving.
POEM

It's nice and warm on the south side
of this big rat's nest.

These particular rats live in the middle
of a field, not in cellars, where
members of the populace hurry crazily
around the housewife, making her scream.

But those who do live under the buildings
can plead innocent. They see no other way.
They're blind and frantic. Hearing footsteps
they turn negative with fear.

Yes, the rats asleep here,
with a thatched roof of sunlit twigs
and the fields surrounding them
like flower gardens to walk through—
they must be happy.
Studious insomniacs by day. Positioned behind our windows, we were forced to confront the tedium of repetition.

In this season, fog or a blizzard followed rain, and also preceded blank skies. Centered in a weather-maze: we performed rituals.

For instance, the reobservation of detail: the length of the river almost black, the sky and factory smoke inseparable; and people continuing to trudge by in cheap shoes.

We debated means of liberation. In this regard, we speculated on the origin of laughter.

Still serious mental creatures. Generally silent, we explored deep recesses of optimism. Until the skyline might become a private comedy, a subtle joke.
A STORY IN WHICH I AM INVOLVED

How the little green spider ran through a forest of dog fur,
how the dog crossed a field of hay to me.

How I tell about the scene,
give rhetoric the floor,
gesticulate with many fingers--

the spider legs counting seconds,
the restless dog, his breathing in summer--

I spin a tremendous tale,
I sit at its center, laughing, crying,
only wanting to take a shit.
The mailman, moving from box to box, sunlight flattening his dull feathers... the concise illumination of the days.

And the willow branches close to bud swing with the motion of pendulums in museums, tracing a thousand predetermined paths in the air.

Dwarf pines freshly planted at right angles to each other, the ordering principle exaggerated in spring, the mailman wiping sweat from his shaven jaw— even as bodies coupled under leaves and in green thickets turn the air incongruous.
FOOD

I lose my teeth,
but my tongue remains,
a harbor protecting
and savoring the last food reserves.

Tender potato, squash, hen,
lightly I touch all of you
and in doing so
save you from violent rape.

Bands of mercenaries
whose beards are nests
for bits of carrion
would do you ill service--
no doubt.

Peacefully, willingly,
you grace my palate.
We grow old,
we dissolve together.
Once upon a time
a Frenchman deserted the Revolution
and stowed away in the rancid guts
of a ship bound for Canada.

Perhaps confused about his prospects
on a battlefield littered with hands and ears,
he married a squaw in Quebec
and became a savage
living in the wilderness.

With his teeth
he ground down and swallowed the flesh
of trout, berries, and bear.

His descendants remained in the tribe
until the first great-great-grandson,
my grandfather,
announced his intentions
to walk to Montreal
to learn unavoidable customs.

Merging with the white race proved difficult,
but the government officially recognized him
for valor in the First World War
after a surgeon removed
half of his left leg.

Luck overtook him
when he married a French woman
and was granted a son
to uphold tradition,
before dying in the prime of his factory life.

The boy, my father,
would tell me stories
depicting the struggles of our family
in a graphic way.

And then
for no apparent reason
some well-mannered policemen came
and took him away for good.

Now, fully grown,
I sit in a quiet room,
somewhat hesitant,
all alone
with the details of our history,
the one-hundred troubles imposed on us by sheer fate
circling around me
like some kind of birds of prey.

And I admit right now
I want to run.
The animal returns to his master in installments:
ribbons of fat, ribbons of lean around his bones
as they wait in a cold cell for deliverance

by a woman with soft white hands.
Luminous glow as the door is swung open;
then a kitchen, warm, like heaven.

November outside: the wind, the trees whining,
pushed back and forth, ignored by men.
Look at the dull belts widening around the fields:
you can see ghettos of birches.
The missing saw, the missing woodcutter,
and the trees, failing to cope.
After I wake, I lie in bed--I don't want to move because the result is either ridiculous, farcical, or a substantial risk. The same kind of effort would cause squash or melons to break their stalks, liberating them, also destroying them. On the other hand, I'm sweating like a pig in these sheets, like an animal fully conscious in his stall, next to his shit, with an overpowering blue sky showing through his window.

So I weigh the two sides, so perfectly balanced, again and again...
THE GARDEN

Corn seeds,
my grandfather will tend your birth,
don't worry,
every spring he shields
fragile shoots
such as yours
with hands rough as bark,
and the water he will feed you
is clear.
Likewise, tomatoes,
soon to become his children,
suspended, helpless

In summer he will pass with confidence
among green rows,
yet before he broke the soil
all was bare.

During winter he marked on paper
where things would grow,
and also set down
the staggered dates of harvest,
so that you seeds, you plants
should have no cause for doubt.
The old man is a guardian:

it's simple to bear flowers for him
and fruit which he takes
at dusk

to his pale kitchen.
POEM

Ambitions dissolving: wet, mutilated blueprints.
Yet the idiotic clues
as to where I am in this place
haunt me in perfect detail.

Last night I stayed home; the dog licked my hand.
You believe every word I say, don't you, dog...

He trusts my miscalculations.
Confident animal, addressing me with his eyes.

With this dog at my side,
I should be a proud father,
or at least the owner of a gentle champion.
How is it we can earn no respect...
THE DRUNK

Excuse me,
it would be nice
to see the old drunk
stagger into a business lunch
in a restaurant trimmed with mahogany.

He might be seated
at the center table
in a stiff chair
like the other guests,
and drool
unnoticed
into his beard.

With talk
droning around him
his thoughts could wander
to pleasant islands in the Pacific
he never saw--

if he were allowed
to sit among those dignitaries
I swear he would be
completely content.