1992

Imperial shoe palace: a collection of poems

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Dedicated to David,
for all those moments
you've caught my soul
at the last moment.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## I.

- Bad Mood ................................................................. 1
- Food Poem ...................................................................... 2
- Veins ............................................................................ 3
- Freckled ......................................................................... 4
- Sister of a Famous 19th Century Archaeologist ...... 5
- Master of the Dollhouse ............................................. 6
- Obsession ...................................................................... 7
- Morning Run ................................................................... 8
- Explaining Poetry to My Family .................................. 9
- Sidney, Maine .................................................................. 10
- Paternity ......................................................................... 11
- The Cows ....................................................................... 12
- Fertility .......................................................................... 13
- The Lottery Birds .......................................................... 14

## II.

- The Genie ........................................................................ 16
- Peacock in Garden .......................................................... 17
- Genie Granting Wishes .................................................. 18
- Victoria’s Secret Catalogue ............................................ 19
- Home & Family May 6, 1962 Portland Sunday Telegram .. 20
- Weekend Entertainment Sunday January 9, 1992 ........ 21
- Genie on the Magic Carpet ............................................ 22
- Biography ....................................................................... 23
- The Peacock Poet .............................................................. 26
- Cinderella Diptych .......................................................... 27
- Genie as Spinster .............................................................. 29
I.

In dwelling, live close to the ground.

— Tao Te Ching
Bad Mood

I long for the prehistoric,
for the slow, long taxi-ing of pterodactyls
into their cliff holes. These days it takes a miracle to find home.
I touch my hands
and think of the ancient genes.

The people in this city were never my contemporaries.
They’ve put the children of my best friends
in glass display cases, or roped them off.
Some have suffocated.
Others have been placed in positions intolerable in life:
Tyrannosaurus Rex beside the plant-eater.

Yesterday I lost my patience.
My body’s a landscape
    which will not settle down.
I reached high and threw stars
into the walls. Your livingroom, I said,
See and be struck dumb.
Their eyes dried to silver,
their hearts, hinged shells clattering to the floor.
The rain began again everywhere and I'm
much happier now.
One night, she comes back to the house
when least expected, entering
through the kitchen, which hasn’t changed

since her long childhood: the yellow floor
she swept through school vacations, the orange counter
like a boomerang. She opens the cupboards,

all twenty-four, waiting for her like a black hive. Into the pickle jar,
she lowers her pumping heart. Plucking out
her pale eyelashes, she fills the spice rack. She hauls out her veins

and rewrites the cookbooks. There’s a lock
of her baby hair in the tiny box
holding the laminated recipes for the strained apricots and tapioca

her mother spoon-fed her for nineteen years.
She swallows the recipes in bits, chewing each
bite two dozen times. Upstairs,

her parents are sleeping on a queen-sized bed, their tanned faces touching
in second youth on blue flannel sheets.
She begins to hover,

her arms extended and florescent as the doors
of a refrigerator opened at night. She stills the garlic
cloves, clustered on her collar bones like bells

& waits.
Veins

I remember my initial awe
after seeing white paper under a microscope.

There were canyons and falls
where I had thought only endless resistance

and where there were words
ink in black glaciers

furrowed the smooth plains,
as when I saw my father dash the white, well-meant angel cake,
given by neighbors, into the kitchen sink.
Mother, in a hospital bed,

nude and cold on paper sheets,
her ice white legs stapled and pinned

where the blue twisting veins had been tugged
from the marble system of her.
Freckled

Wash your hands, put on your nightgown, look not so pale

Lady Macbeth

In Spanish class, the professor
directed attention to my bare arms.
Spots of sin, she said.
Nowadays, I could use some infamy.
I’d settle for scandal, blood dropping onto white tile.
Instead, I go to the basin crazy
as a repentant with instructions
to scrub my palms ten times an hour. Daylight
happens this way, rinsing over me.
It can’t persuade me to change my plans,
to bend at the hips like a plant on the windowsill.
I am blue
and transparent. Frustrating as marble,
a photographer complained. He wanted nudes
of me for my skin.
A response is lashing out from my bones
in a rash of drowned nouns:
Help me. I must get out
of myself. I need to show more than sheets
of radiation, an afterglow translated an hour later
in some other room.
Sister of a Famous 19th Century Archaeologist

In woodside cellar holes
blue bottles rose, black widows
scurried up the elongated necks
of vanilla bottles and miracle
serums for fallen wombs
where my brother and I excavated
on our summer vacation
a parson once lived and a cobbler
hammered iron to the soles of ponies.
We peeled the grins of skeleton angels
from the infants' graves with charcoal and newsprint
and in the deepest parts of the woods
where only the deer or lost children went
in the granite there were the marks
of pioneer wagons. In midnights
I imagined the scratches
falling an inch or so
as though released from a magnet.
Once, I discovered a lady's whalebone button
in the murk of black ferns;
it glimmered opalescent. The next day
in the cemetery a mosquito bit me
above the eyelid.
I became so swollen I had only one eye
left to see. I couldn't run
as fast as Tom and in August
I was given a corset
and afternoon sittings in the parlor chair.
There was, I now believe,
a certain relief when my arms became white
as chalk sticks,
the muscle falling away from my bones.
Someone knowing voodoo has cast their eye upon you, made you this small. It's a statistic that the world hates more than anything to be made smaller than it is. You read the stock columns of your wooden newspaper with its permanent creases, sip painted glue from a tea cup. When the maid curtsies, flapping her stamp-sized apron, you forget you're of her kind. Upstairs, the tattoo of whittled feet and sawing sound of the rocking horse: your Victorian children are playing with the silverware you've worn thin eating air. At night, a fat-cheeked face bulges through the bedroom windows. You're propelled to the stars by a pudgy fist, dropped into infinity. If your sawdust skull meets with ceiling or floor, it's only laissez-faire. Or call of duty.
In this small Chinese world of cork
the necessary cuts can not be perceived
not even in the lacework of gables.
How much patience it must have taken,
the worker bent into nearsightedness
to carve a tree with leaves shaped like a Venus fly trap,
a white stork with legs so miniscule
they're too thin for the smallest disturbance.
There are knots in the trunk of the tree
and the glass is thick and stubborn.
It has to be: a knick knack on the more long term wood
of a desk. Once I believed
the telephone would send me rushing
through this sealed silence, growing large
as I took-off over the typewriter. I'd glide
off the desk and be full-sized by the third ring.
My fingered wings panning the air,
I could catch the bee coming in from the window,
the bee with its stinger folded up between black thorny legs,
bee coming from the flower it's recently sliced; the flower called Futility.

Obsession
This is what I owe to Hawthorne:
a terror of forest meetings, witches
having sex with a nameless
man holding a staff that twists into a serpent
during my run to the Congregational Church.
Cacophonic trees
rattle their sticks behind my ears.
Oh Hawthorne, how could you have known
about the tubes of tear gas
half-clothed women run with
and the eyes of men in pickup trucks the tubes are meant for?
In these trailers without plumbing, old wives are seasonally sacrificed
by their husbands in cabin fever.
Lay down your pen as your witch-loving
grandfather would want and whistle
me a happy tune, something about Faith
in pink ribbons, for this mile.
Explaining Poetry to My Family

By the pool table, my kid brother says he hates poetry. Red, green, yellow balls dash to different corners. He has grown four inches in four months: limbs spurt from his heart. I bet at night he lies in bed and his hands pass over the braille of his face. My father has been secretly reading *Best American Short Stories*. I find the library books in the bathroom, beside the slung nail belt. When he discovers that I write poetry, not fiction, a carefully-built structure will ignite. I am an arsonist. Dad, I plead: think of poetry as slipping walls, fireproof, where there once was unenclosed space.
Sidney, Maine

In a circle of year
sanded snow rises and falls
beside the box walls of the town hall
like flood markings.

Leather-faced bachelors
return on muddy tractors to mute barnyards.

Glistening babies are pulled from hollows of mucus.
A mechanic with oil-deadened hands
paces on his porch as the day runs a thumb
across the field of bleached cattle corn. Flies rattle
in the Baptist church tower,
throwing their hard little bodies into the cup of the bell.
On the tower floor, crucifixes made of popsicle sticks
abandon themselves to the sun.

Old women die and mothballs are unwrapped
from their favorite clothes.
A young man who had everything imaginable
is buried alive in his father's gravel pit.
At the new school, books are bought with last year's taxes.
Stoves burn greasy wood;
ash falls back onto softball caps,
greys the hair of children who are sucking gravel.
See how the corn swallows the grit in these almanac hours
thrusting forth flowers of red and black pearls.
Paternity

All evening the bitch has been howling
and the man frowns. He tosses tap water
onto his face. When the last puppy was taken,
he hadn’t cared if the boy looked like a dog-kicker.

Throwing a steak into the skillet,
the dog’s cry troubles him.

Like a single note on some instrument
of sadness, carved from reed.

Outside, there’s a creature with a belly
of genuine pain. A week and she won’t remember.

The shed to which she’s chained holds the tricycles,
their safety cables gone to rust.

Useless teats on her like buttons from some silly
costume. His own childhood is as small

as a toy wheel’s scratch on the floor. At night,
when he walks through the rooms, he knows

they have already forgotten
him. His daughters.
Before I became sick, my parents
found the farmer’s daughter and I
prodding each other’s genitals with straw.
I was beaten and sent to bed in the middle of the afternoon.
At night, I couldn’t sleep;
my mother was crying to my father as though someone
had died. Sixteen years later
the girl has large bones, weighted with white flesh.
The quick blackmail in her eyes
is the electricity of a fence that looks old
and unused. I lie in bed while my parents sleep
and imagine the farmer’s son
walking down the stair case of an empty farmhouse,
going to the barn before the sun.
He turns on the equipment and snaps his hands
into rubber gloves. In each stall
he caresses the cold-slowed bodies
of the cows. Generating life, as though
they were his lover, his sisters.
On the sixth grade playground, the girl hangs upside down on the monkey bars, blood running into her forehead when it occurs to her to tell about the fetus in her mother's jewelry box. To the bestfriend listening, anything is possible with welfare people. She's seen them buying groceries with rainbow money. They have children without men and it's all there: a grinning child on a bed of brushed velvet, ribs like the parts of a busted bracelet. Tiny finger bones folded like cuff links. A birth that never happened, like the first name or an engagement ring lost down the drain years before. The swings cut above the girls' heads like shears. Two miles from the school, there's an abandoned house they'll break into in summer. On a hill of milkweed, it winks bright as the eyelid of a snowy owl. Smoked glass waiting for the shatter, blood dripping from a finger, braids growing longer like ropes.
Driving to work, I look for smashed birds.  
In the ditch, the bent wings  
of everyone's discarded lottery tickets  
rise from the wind stream of my truck  
then sink as a flock.  
The metal-coated paper gleams two-toned  
and in the general store, factory men scratch new lottery tickets  
for the six birds that could take the number  
pinned onto their chests forever.  
One of them could hit the windfall.  One of them could drive  
through town in a car with iced air.  
Every month, the state commissioner comes  
with a new game in his brief case.  
For me, it will have to be the sight of orange feathers  
in the fetal position.  A mouth of song  
drilled into road construction.  Luck flying to another  
is a target you'll never miss.  Hope broken a second before the neck.
II.

Fishes made of velvet, of organdie with lace fangs

— Anais Nin
The Genie

The inside of his house is cloisonne: stories
people whisper about him as they pass around his pewter tea pot
have stuck. On the divan, the genie entertains a harlequin
who crosses orange and black legs of triangles.
He tells of the Marti Gras he's just come back from.
Sighing, the genie looks to the paper mache death mask
he wore once at such a festival. It hangs from a hook.
He finds himself eating too much Turkish Delight;
the harlequin is as thin as the stork that travels routinely
past the genie's chimney, dragging baby boy or girl.
The stories they tell about him
are of local color. Color blind, the genie, if he could wish,
would wish for a translator.
We were on duty.
Our orders came from a gigantic gold hand
with feathers for fingernails.
It gestured in sign language.

Apparently there was some prophetic risk
in snakes for the two humans
who spent Eternity bending grass blades
and gathering mangos to feed to the lions.

Between everyone else there was difference. No one looked
exactly alike, except us. One giraffe was a bit taller;
there were horns on the head of one moose. It was the addition
of differences that made them what we could never be.
Our full plumage spread us apart. We couldn’t touch.
It was the origin of uniforms.

So, when the snake came, sitting on the most crooked root
he could find and speaking so eloquently, he didn’t tell us
anything we didn’t already know. Despite the slander,
we hadn’t been pecking at that apple on the sly.
We’ve always had four eyes between us and a mind of our own.
Genie Granting Wishes

He comes out in a billow of car exhaust, studded with rhinestones, and they fall to their knees.

When he's done everything possible, they drive off in fan-tailed Cadillacs, bumping into the rain clouds, stereos booming.

Sometimes he grants them a wish just to shut them up.
A certain bank executive I know has a harem
locked in his file cabinet.

On lunch breaks,
while his colleagues swallow chicken salad

in Conference Room 209,
he is slipping across the oriental carpet.

Blondes and brunettes in merrywidows,
holiday silk & the tulip camisole in charmeuse, p. 28,

coo to him in a Sussex accent.
They wrap his feet in emerald slippers from the men’s section

and handfeed him Godiva chocolates
though he isn’t good with their names. Their faces: air-blown.

Let me tell you I happen to know of 106 women
in advertising, sisters of the blondes & brunettes,

who are actually transvestites. They’ve researched his tax bracket,
credit card limit & the gifts he gives

to his wife for no apparent reason. They know the reason.
The couches with clawed feet are rented from a fly-by-night

furniture house in the Back Bay. Moving men have tacked up the paper
library and the embossed autographed set of Dickens

is recyclable. Here’s the real ingenuity: they only had to do this once.
One polaroid

of a man in a suit in a skyscraper in a city
which they could dress in a different watch band and shoes

and use in a thousand lunch breaks, a thousand lonely men
with their fantasies of lace in a phallic skyline.
Moonlight cocktails are the thing.
Pamela likes to wear a crazy hat. Is your home wired for Modern Living?
Jane rides in her father's new pink Bel Air 4-Door Sedan. This popularly-priced jet-smoothie rides like a family room on wheels.

Dear Ann Landers, is your home wired for modern living?
It's going to mean waiting of course, and even after you've been accepted you'll probably think it's never going to happen. But then one day you'll get that phone call notifying you to get ready and from then on everything will be different.

Pamela likes to wear a crazy hat when she & Daddy march around the house to their own music.
Dear Ann, You bring your husband's favorite dish out of the kitchen (where you've been stirring & simmering it along all afternoon) and set it before him. "How does it taste?" you ask. If he were to give a scientifically-accurate answer, he'd have to confine his reply to one of four words: sweet, salty, sour, bitter.

Ann, do you masturbate? Do you stir yourself all afternoon while he's away, stir yourself with fingers painted in Pleasantly Pink 2?
The girl I marry will have to be soft & pink as a nursery.
Her nails will be polished. She'll purr like a kitten, a doll I can carry, the girl I'll marry.

In the family room, Pamela & Daddy march around the house & Daddy pulls down her pretty panties, a daisy pattern on sale at the children's department in Kilanti's. Social workers can give you the feeling of being on trial. But then one day you'll get that phone call & Jane has left the cartoon boys playing cowboys & Indians while Mrs. David M. Fieldman, 92 Clifton St., simmering in her own kitchen, is completely remodeled and done in a pink motif. Appliances are also pink.
'OK,' they said, 'Only a few cigarettes when you're out with the crowd, so you won't feel uncomfortable,' so you won't feel as though you were on trial because, are you prepared for this modern living?
Tell us about that horrible date.  
We'll publish the best of the worst  
of the mating ritual. "What becomes  
of the broken hearted?" Who can forget  
the dreamy way she blew her nose on the menu?  
Don't Just Dream About Your Future.  
All entries of you should be on display  
by eleven a.m. & be large enough  
to accommodate twenty taste-sized servings.  
Aesthetic supplies can be rented at our  
ever-popular, semi-annual, quasi-intimate  
apparel sale. Complete lines of our major venders:  
Playtex, Maidenform, Subtract, & many more  
will be there to watch from the sidelines.  
Adam had one wife but wanted more.  
One man, two wives and nineteen children  
behind a barricade in the longest FBI siege ever.  
It's a television documentary. At quarter past eleven  
a third wife lingers behind the trailer park,  
fastening a black lace bra and sneezing.  
Her anticipation is that she is co-dependent,  
her seriousness someone else's entertainment.
Sometimes he goes out for a ride. He might take a companion: there's just space enough. He prefers the young, slightly post-pubescent, those mother-of-pearl complexions and jaws of pretty teeth constantly agape with amazement. They look foolish because he is as wise as the white stag flirting behind diamond pines in a medieval tapestry.

A spree might last decades so the genie packs provisions. The rug tassels are edible. They pass over cities of palatial domes, glass flags flying from milky spires. When women veiled in black gauze pass into gardens below, the genie blesses them with infinite allure and revenge. He hones the Swiss army knives taped inside their sleeves. When the journey ends, the genie wipes the chubby face of his companion, wipes off chocolate and the fruit of knowledge, slipping superstition and unbelievable luck into pockets.
I.

His mother's bedroom was always dark.
The one window faced shade and the walls were pine. The room scuttled toward him when he came through the door; it craned its neck. He imagined gold eye slits glinting down at him. In the summer, the wall leaked a fluid, the sap which trapped ants in primordial forests.

Women make pendants of amber, hanging them between their breasts. The frozen ants scream for millenniums, seeing what's below and above, their black legs thrashing in golden light.

In the middle of her bedroom was the bed, queen-sized with massive posts like fists.
Once, his mother pushed him onto it. Winking to his father, she told him he was made from this bed.
He looked at the huge satin flowers with open mouths swallowing tiny bees, the tasseled cloth. He was lost.

Only when they weren't around, gone for a drive or fishing off the piers, he'd open the big walnut jewelry box. In the lid of mirror he saw myself in the act of opening. Inside on a bed of rough velvet were the chains of appleseed from their honeymoon in Hawaii, the matching coral rings, and her girlhood charm bracelet. He'd touch the doors to the tiny church and a man and a woman came out kissing. He'd lower his face into the box, breathing the smell of the polish his father scrubbed on Sundays into his work shoes. When he put on her clip-ons, his head heavy with jewelry, he looked more like her than him in the full-length mirror.
His father had a warehouse where he sold carpets. They leaned like columns waiting to be exported from a temple.
His father’s arms snapped the rugs like pistons. He made the rugs break sound barriers, become thunder. The gold tassels singed, cilia swimming in schools through the pastey afternoon light, drooping from the ceiling window.
Rug after rug his father unfurled before the polished faces of young couples. In the poor light no one saw the medallions of mold, mildew from the river.
The mold spread at night.
It worked its way over the rugs of Spanish debauchery, over harlots and grapes, bellydancing women with laughing eyes and pompadours of black hair.
The long plank table of men being satiated.
The mold didn’t even spare the simple ones with their stained glass abstractions.
The afternoon he went outside and wrapped himself in a rug completely encased in mold,
a snake slid beneath the dripping pipes.
He couldn’t breathe. The ambulance, a white gleaming temple, was called. Gods in white lifted him onto a palanquin and ambrosia was needled through his arm as someone brushed the mold from his hair with all the gentleness of a dream lover.

II.

That year he was a peon. The older boys flicked him with wet towels made sharp as dragons’ tongues and blue bruises streamed like salmon up his perfect white thighs as he slipped into the showerstall. What could he do? He had a smile like those made by Michelangelo. He was one of the thinner gods, his body not yet roped with muscles though he lifted iron as if he held the world.
His father died during the summer.
He weighed ninety-six pounds.
The cancer took fifty pounds of his stomach, nine from his face and two more off the lining of his heart.
He thinks now to continue living means leaving part of yourself behind, like gold dust.
Nail clippings, fallen hair, the teeth of your smile.
Each day, his father was building up for the fall to the ground.
Somebody sleeps on forever every morning
when you lift myself from your bed. Any bed.

III.

This year his apartment is a wall of stainless steel pots.
They gleam, polished. He is a good cook
but he never turns on the stove. There’s a restaurant in the department store
a block away where the coffee’s not bad and the chrome
blenders and walls show everything that’s behind him
like a convex looking glass, where fuschia-colored juice
is bounced up and down in a machine that never stops.
When he has a good afternoon,
he takes a glass of water and stands at his window.
Men, beautiful men, walk by. One walks around the old lady
in housedress, pushing a shopping cart.
One waits for his change from the newspaper vender.
The afternoon sun shifts until it hits him,
the water glass a prism casting dots of rainbows
behind him. He has loved but never enough.
The Peacock Poet

*in thinking of S.T. Coleridge*

During the summer season, he's installed in his elaborate bamboo cage, communing with an arranged Nature and preening beauty until it smells entirely like him.

Crowds of listeners pass. The same green and blue analogies are lauded over and over, falling like his own plumage into a nest. It's a nest he can never rest easily in and when the zoo attendant is inattentive and the men & women one by one take the feathers the wind's blown beyond the bars, the peacock doesn't mind. *Adieu, adieu. Please remember the copyright.* Feathers carried away, stuck at angles in ladys' hats, stroked like a piece of flattery.

By Labor Day, the peacock's always a cause for worry. Loosing weight, his feathers more and more lackluster, even suicidal. How can he eat when every kernel, every bit of toasted bun, is a foreign taste, not him? Art, art, pass over the tongue. Mr. God, take him in your incubator arms, take him away, out of their sight.
Cinderella Diptych

I.

In crystal bowls, holiday tangerines 
are helpless to stop their own desirability; 
it streams from their pores 
and each day ripens. 
Such is the regime. It is sweet 
to be selected and consumed. 
On Christmas Eve, I'm locked in the pantry 
preparing the foods of fairy tales: 
bowls of mulberry punch, entire boars 
with golden apples between candied teeth. 
I'm summoned to the oak hall 
where I kneel and listen 
to Frank Sinatra broadcasted from a station on Mt. Washington 
as he tap-dances around snowflakes 
above rootless fields and highways of travelers 
who watch for their own arrival. 
He will come for me 
because everything concealed will be peeled for its value 
as red wrapping paper is torn off packages from Macys. 
The shoes one size too small 
will have to be returned the next day. 
Back in the pantry, I scrub the stains 
from my feet. There are fainthearted slippers 
of silk to come and a chandelier like a good wish 
wanded over my head. I can hear 
the ballroom music and a sigh.
II.

On my way to the Imperial Shoe Palace,
I stop in the face lift parlor. Betty Crocker, the proprietress,
smiles at me: she knows my step-sisters.
In my basket, the shoes that did not fit:
china flats embroidered with lotus flowers.
A strange little woman keeps whispering
into my left ear. Her tinsel wings make a din
like the machinery behind a future, or a prank
phone call. He will come for you, she buzzes,
her voice so high-pitched that at first I think
its the shoplift detector. He will come for you
because your life lies in a canopy bed beyond this story.
All I know is I could loose my job
if she makes me late. All morning, the pumpkins
I peeled for tonight's soup
kept changing shape in my hand.
Tomorrow, if she follows me, I'll call the police.
Once, the genie was nearly married. The courtship of the genie and the tooth fairy lasted many moons. They held alabaster hands and walked over high ivory footbridges, under which fat, orange goldfish swam in the green ribbons of stream. It was Spring again and again. The genie kept putting the needle back and the waters overflowed, making violets and red toadstools grow in the bright grass like hat pins. Nagging at the genie was the thought that his lover was responsible for some atrocity. Her apartment was four walls of teeth. She served tea in hollowed-out wisdom teeth. At night, this monster was the twist in her side that the genie felt as she slept. When they parted, she began seeing a cowboy from spaghetti westerns. The genie kept to himself, spending a decade tarnishing his tea pot. As if he could call love back, he left a snapshot under his pillow where it glowed iridescent as a moth wing when the moths race after aphrodisiac in summer night.