PAT MATSUEDA

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For Michael Spera,
a love of the word and the image

Pat Matsueda

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the following people: Frank Stewart, Suzzan Matsueda, Kathy Matsueda, and Nell Altizer. Mahalo for their support and aloha.

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I

AT THE EDGE

Strewn over a table
are a child's messages to me,
pictures of her desires,
stories of what would be
if she were a god.
She has been away too long
from those she thought loved her.
Now, to lead me amid
the confusion of her disasters,
she has put my name
in a white frame
to sing.

I try to reach her
before fate will mar her,
with its own disasters.
So I sing back,
but with excessive gestures
and in foreign languages
which, unlike those meant for Ulysses,
are too easily left.
II

TO HER MOTHER

for Chloe

Weak sunlight fills the space between the hedges
as neatly as a white envelope;
and out of it steps your mother
She is before us before we know her,
her dark-brown dress spread wide
like a palm against her body.
In this long moment of confusion,
there is only her,
materializing.

The orange and yellow pattern of her dress
is like a trellis
against the dark background.
We, wanting to find her
in this strange, soft form,
begin to fill in the grid
with flesh and stronger warmth;
but she will not yet be.
We remember the familiar face,
climb the patterned trellis
to look into the new one;
but still the silence.

She will not be,
cannot be,
even for us.
III

POINT OF RECOVERY

Since you were responsible for someone, death was forbidden you.
Still, you thought you wouldn't live through her daily attempts
to rid herself of imperfect.
That surgery which she practiced weakened you who were so sympathetic	
till one day she had to leave you —
just as flowers eventually withdraw from what sustains them.

Now you rest through the summer days.
Dreams bend toward you like slender trees,
offering their lovely heads to supplant old faces.
The sickly orange and brown tiles of the floor
seem capable only of dull secrets
or those that don't matter
because they come too late.

Yet once you wanted to be something better;
so you stare at the floor,
trying multiple configurations,
rerearranging the delicate symbols of your beliefs.
White skin peeling from your fingers
reminds you of letters and pale photographs
in which you tried to render your desperation
with a literary detachment.
You were afraid.
You had to be ill, you can't help recovering.
IV

THE DIFFERENCE

Her office, as opposed to yours,
has large rectangles of diffused light,
falling on books asleep like children.
She sits away from her desk,
comfortable and bold at forty-five.
Her spring-water eyes almost win out
against the maroon sweater and dark-green chair.
And every inch of her smile
is only the distance
between her and everything else in her office.

You come to her to talk,
your eyes spilling drink and anger.
You hope you won’t have to confront
the desire well mannered for your sake.
Again the two of you compare your pasts,
as if you could relieve the pain
with synonyms alone,
then finally humiliate the crisis
with sighs and laughter.
You leave, refreshed,
after she has carefully loved you.

Back in your office,
you uproot the plant atop your desk.
It falls into the wastebasket
thick and dry and pliable as cord,
dead from inattention.
THOSE UNNAMED

who roll out of the heart
and take your love away
so you never see her again—
Once, you poured love into her
and refreshed yourself continually
till life seemed something you could store
like water or gold
Now you go home
and find light sitting like a bird
upon your doorknob
You turn the cold thing
and walk into an empty room,
sigh and fill a glass
Against a wall lit with summer
and on one palm,
you lean and then
close your eyes.
In simple acts,
where truth is mere description
and mere description the truth,
you find you sense her best:
the lovely face that looked at you
believing you fair,
bELIEVING YOU GAVE MORE
of something more yourself
each unfailing day
VI

PRAYER FOR ALCOHOLICS

Dear Lord:
I see the spray
of your warm grace
this afternoon falling
on the baseball field
near the music room
of the high school.
While I wait
for some circumstance
of my situation
to change.
I see spray
scattered into the air
like rice thrown after
a loved bride.
Vigorous
while leaves flutter
with the same light
that makes the spray white.
The scene like music
against the sounds of birds
and small children,
whose sounds will someday
change.
But more vigorous now
the wind shakes the trees
as if to rob them
of spray and leaves,
filling the air
with a moan
that envelopes the sound
of children.
When my young daughter
touches me,
it's as if a bell
is speaking.
It surprises my flesh.
I remember when
I was a child:
how my father
taught me to draw
a perfect Indian's head.
He guided my hand:
it was the only thing
he could draw;
and I learned well
the abstract shapes which
when combined
make a smiling,
benign face,
one that doesn't know
time or loss.
But drawing it now
gives me no pleasure:
it is too perfect
or perhaps the perfection
had gone out of my hand
when I stopped
loving him:
my alcoholic father.

Now I pray
for the other men
close to me.
For the fury and misery
that bring them close to ruin.
I drink the afternoon's
honey light,
the gold drink of the world,
hearing weak,
self-righteous voices.
There is no grace
save that falling,
lost on the soft
and infinitely tender
grass.
POEM FOR THE UNICORN

You say you find an inner
Force in bodies, and watch
The smallest fiber turn
Upon an inner rule.
—John Logan

I
The house where you stay
is cold in the morning;
it is the beginning
of a late season in the islands.
You take your glasses off
and strain to bring the world
into focus.
Your face could have the texture
of an old painting
if you would not ignore it,
but bunches of your hair
will not sell for anything.
You put a strand aside
as if it were a piece of thread.

On the other side of the street,
young men are resting against a wall,
their slightly bowed heads
fused into a light cloth of shadows
edged in rust and gold.
The wind blows wide, shallow waves
against them,
parting their hair,
touching their eyes and lips and necks
more softly than you ever could.
You touch the strong green stems
of your tall flowers.
II
The afternoon quiet
is drawn across your hands and arms
like a worn, black curtain.
Upon your dark desk
white paper sleeps,
and you are watching the light
burn through the louvres.
You want to speak clearly
in your letter,
as if for the first time.
*The universe is too concave for me;*
*my dreams promise no rebirth.*
*Even here there are no angels;*
*only the bodies of men will take*
*the guilt inside the flesh.*

Walking along the shore
to deliver your letter,
you move through the cold
like a careless woman
indifferent to the life in her womb.
Your swollen stomach
is an old, dark-toned bell.
In you sorrow is continually raised
like some obsolete monument,
to be destroyed, then resurrected again.
The sea breaks over your head,
and the birds clatter like ordinary women
before an old man
distilling sleep
from the liquor of his friends.
VIII

IMAGES OF BALZAC

cast by Rodin

He stands
in the ruined green afternoon,
the hollows of his eyes
like big, dark medals
hung from his brow,
wound in his monk's robe
like a ship caught in the long,
gauzy arms of the wind

And in another photograph
the white plaster cast,
the final Balzac
that stood sheltered in the studio
until the artist's death,
a smoky white ghost
anchored in the darkness
as if earth were hell

It shall never be
erected anywhere Rodin said
but bronzes of it
were cast posthumously:
from smoky ghost
to iron-colored defiant
cast for museums,
it rejects these homes
with a single, untiring look

Only at ease
in the green atmosphere
of the Steichen photograph,
like an ancient fish
swimming so slowly so deeply
he seems motionless
or finally
at rest

Balzac truly heroic, who makes night into day,
who drives himself in vain to fill the gaps
made by his debts, who above all dedicates
himself to building an immortal monument.

—Rodin
IX

TWO EXILES

I: To Tristan

Brave, consuming statue,
in sleep exiled from me also.
One stern arm holds the sword
which gleams like the iron twilight.
Slowly the moon leaves the sky
and enters like the angel Raphael
come to speak to the first man
of discrimination in love.
Fair, devoted angel
leaves us far behind
in his errorless wake.

Love flourishes in this grotto,
netting and threading the air
till it sways like a heavy flower.
In the morning,
you will regard me like the sun,
your faithful heart shining;
and always, while the world beholds the heavens,
we hold each other and lose both.
Still, tempting foreigner,
I stare into your shield of sleep.
Though these tender days have cleansed us,
love will find its way out of here;
and what was known before
will be known again.
One of us
must be awake for the end.
II: To Isolt

Your dress is alive
with swans and parrots
beating against the wind;
yet your bride's step
rules the chaos
of your dress.
Insanely,
I danced with you in my dreams,
till weary of choosing between
what is real and what is not,
I wed the real.

Red dragonflies hover over a pond.
I call Isolt
her only possession is your name
and she teaches me practical things:
how to be a sparrow
when the years are too long.
When I die,
all the sails will turn black,
like the wings of rebellious angels,
and a fire will burn above
my sealed, white face,
and I will not know
it is you.
POEM FOR NORMAN

i watch the roses of the day grow deep
—e. e. cummings

Tobacco and wine and roses
the sweet smell and the acrid
the smoke of cigarettes
and the smoke of flowers
floating across the table.
Outside, the coffee-sprayed evening and the rain;
inside, the restaurant so bright
we sit intoxicated:
our eyes meeting, deflecting
like bells around the necks
of Swiss cows decked with flowers
on holidays.

At the other end of the table a child —
her ninth birthday
(the reason we've gathered to celebrate)—
and a young boy
with red-flecked skin and green eyes.
Roses and white baby's breath
in the center of the table . . .
and suddenly you go mad
like a cow breaking from the light of the pasture
the smell of tall grass driving you
like a knife against your neck.

Questions, you want questions from me,
the white of years of suffering
displayed like a huge diamond upon your finger,
the red of Bardolino wine
burning like a rose against your cheek.
The other end of the table burns in the fire
of being nine, tended by your young son.
Innocence blazes on the children's skin
as they sit, laughing, under the chandelier.
The baby's breath is like a screen of tears
through which we see them.
It makes us turn away,
seek comfort from what we know,
each other.

"Ask me questions, Pat."
I ask you about your wife,
the mainland (where you've just been),
love, the promise of marriage —
it quickly becomes abstract and deadly:
the real world charges through our conversation
and, bloodied, you slow down.
You try to hide the wound out of shame,
then go crazy sorrowing,
finally reveal it to strangers...
Meanwhile, in the young girl,
pain has just begun to be fixed
like the smoke of sweetness in the roses,
the black stains in the wine,
someday to be discovered
with a ring of tears about the mouth.
Later, we will put the children to bed
and breathe their sweet youth,
drink the fearlessness of their love:
things so subtle they will nearly kill us.
But the grief we foresee for our children
is yet years away.
The inheritance of powerful
and foundering dreams.
COLOPHON

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A limited edition is signed; this is: