

Scribal: My Mother in the Voting Booth

Stabbing the hole by Nixon's name, with a stylus on a chain,
like some scribe
in Lagash piercing wet clay slabs for the palace records. The count
for the priest king's
chariots & Amorite slaves must be exact. All day her adding machine
has purred, the shavings

litter the floor. Stylus through Nixon, stylus through Agnew. Two hours
she's waited in the wet
November snow of Minnesota & her cold next week will worsen
to pneumonia. Over
the churning columns she'll cough & pass out & waken in County General,
shrouded in an oxygen tent

where she cannot smoke. The count must be exact—14 lyres with
the heads of bearded bulls,
130 votives, 6 figurines of Marduk fashioned of hammered gold.
The water glass is trembling.
Beside her bed I hover, the clear walls of the tent breathe in & out.
Flicker of Cronkite,

of Nixon on the wall in black & white. He has a secret plan
to end the war.
She sleeps. The tent draws a breath & the joint I smoked
in the parking lot turns the light
a jack-o'-lantern orange. I tell myself in my teenage hubris
that I will not work on

Maggie's Farm like her. Ain't gonna work like her
to blindly serve.
But how her white ectoplasmic face looms back at me this morning
(breathe in, breathe out,
the tent's rise & fall) in the waiting room of Richmond Pediatrics.
All night Luke's coughed,

meaning the pneumonia's returned & the office radio oozes hate,
talk show & its porcine
fascist droning on. He has a secret plan to replace the Constitution
with gelignite.

Over us all it washes, the fine volcanic dust, over the fevered
toddlers of the suburbs

& their mothers in sensible shoes, over the *Parentings*
& *Mademoiselles*

& the parking lot minivans, the toxic "W"s affixed to their bumpers.
Breathe in & serve
breathe in & serve. A slab of plastic for the co-pay,
the computer station hums.

Cylinder seal & tapestry, ninety geldings in the palace stables. Nebulizer
spewing Pulmicort.
Pink amoxicillin, doctored to taste like bubblegum. seven double-headed
battleaxes, burnished bronze
now oxidized the color of pond scum. Blindly, blindly do we serve.
O Priest King, Dear Leader,

Jealous God. There hangs her scarlet car coat with its Nixon button,
bogus leopard skin along the collar.
She unzips the tent, she recovers. Manhattans prohibited for fourteen days.
The adding machine reanimates,
numbers coughing & the tapes scrolling out. She lives on, twenty more
deluded years. In the parking lot,

Rx in hand, I strap sleeping Luke in his car seat—streetlights, the yellow
& blood-red leaves, pasted
to the window by the rain. Let me serve him. Let me live on
twenty years. Let me stand
above the burial pits, their goods interred & catalogued, the miles
of dirt tamped down.

August, 1953

A nurse gathers up the afterbirth. My mother



had been howling but now could sleep.



By this time I am gone—also gathered up



& wheeled out. Above my jaundiced face the nurses hover.



Outside, a scab commands a city bus. The picketers battle cops



& ten thousand Soviet conscripts in goggles



kneel & cover their eyes. Mushroom cloud above the Gobi,



& slithering toward Stalin's brain, the blood clot



takes its time. Ethel Rosenberg has rocketed



to the afterlife, her hair shooting flame. The afterbirth



is sloshing in a pail, steadied by an orderly who curses



when the elevator doors stay shut: I am soul & body & medical waste



foaming to the sewers of St. Paul. I am not yet aware



of gratitude or shame.

I do know the light is everywhere.

Screensaver: Pharaoh

We had eaten the placenta in a soup that someone based on a family recipe
for menudo, though someone else—
it was Bill, I think—joked that it tasted just like chicken. *This Year's Model*
was brand new & the needle stuck
on "Lipstick Vogue," Costello snarling *not just another mouth, not just*
another mouth, until Joe

set down the bong & flicked the tone arm forward from the scratch.
& anyway, by this time
Amy was shouting from the bedroom that she'd finally gotten Star to sleep,
that the music should be
Mozart or something. I've forgotten the midwife's name, but she sat
sprawled on a patio chair,

the distant blink of Tucson down the mountainside. She held an iced Corona
& told us she was too worn-out
to drive the snaking foothill two-lanes home. Good dope, cheap champagne,
a soup of afterbirth:
everybody but the midwife garrulous & now Papageno was flapping
birdman wings in his mating dance

around fair Papagena. So the talk turned to duets—scholastic in the way
that stoner conversations go.
Whose placenta was it we slurped down with cilantro & a dash of cumin,
telling ourselves the taste
was not half bad—Amy's or Star's? & what about Derek, who now
had moved to Mykonos,

leaving his storied seed behind: what portion of the recipe was owed
to him? Now came the tricky part—
where did the soul inhere? The midwife rimmed her longneck with
a lemon slice & allowed
that we'd ingested perfection, the body's all-in-one: liver, kidney,
blood supply,

its vascular estuaries spidering from delta to sea, tasting not just of flesh,
but of the corpus entire,
which we all agreed was pretty far-out. Lord how I yearn sometimes
for those days of sudden
bedazzling insight, however false & addled. My eyes went Blakean.
By the firelight I watched

the quaking dance of souls, bi- & tri- & quadrifurcated & hovering among us
in a pea-soup fog,
lavish as dry ice a-swirl from a spliff. My soul, your soul, our soul.
The Oversoul broadcasting
its hundred thousand watts of Motown to the radio speakers of the whole
Southwest; Aretha Soul & Otis Soul

& Sam Cooke Soul. & Pneuma, weighing twenty grams of blazing light.
But then the tone arm
reached the aria's end. The LP clicked off. The room became
sleeping bags & pillows,
Mexican blanket covering a ratty sofa. The parts we didn't eat
we double-bagged

& carried to the dumpster, padlocked to confound the coyotes.
The midwife took the couch
& slept. & by the firelight the whole clan slumbered, the cave wall
throwing shadows. This was
thirty years ago. Where the business of the world has taken us
I cannot say. I reboot,

the pixels gather themselves & pulse at me. I could Google Amy,
Google Star, MapQuest
Speedway Boulevard & call up Derek's obit from the *Sentinel*.
But the screen instead
coalesces to a tomb painting of Pharaoh. Lordly he walks,
preceded by his vassals,

who bear his emblems & trophies, hoisted atop tall staffs.
Among them

is Pharaoh's placenta, preserved & flapping like an ensign.

Raised to the sky,
the crimson portal hovers in the wind. From it the God-King
fell headfirst into this world.

Ending with a Quotation from *Walden*

For three generations

their farmlands

withered

& the Anasazi

took to eating human flesh,

their enemies

First, then at last

their kinsmen.

A pattern

Of scored

& incised human bones

is evidence,

If you know how

to read the auguries

of microscopes.

Forensic:

from the Latin *forensis*,

the marketplace.

The forum

where debate was engaged,

where tricks

Of rhetoric & gesture

might enhance

your case.

But so much

is conjecture—

whose sad flesh

Was churned within

this white-ware pot?

Stranger

Or kin?

The Hated One?

The Beloved One whose touch

You'd stir to

in the dawn,

now portioned & shared
In ghostly ritual?
Or did you sunder bone
between your teeth
& gloating, ingest
the marrow of
your foe?
The innermost:
I wanted to live deep,
writes Thoreau,
& suck out
all the marrow
of this life.