

## THE RISE OF THE COLORED EMPIRES

Those graves and our boulevard divide the morning light, and steer  
the new grass, the nimblewill and weed angling for life. Bereft of grief,  
they mock maintenance with their stubborn shoots, a job I applied for, once,

and didn't get. Instead, I was relieved of my boredom with a free pair  
of Asics, three polo shirts, and the title "court attendant" at the U.S. Open.

It was the summer the Williams sisters first flashed their brilliance

and an unseeded Russian was in love with the best hockey player  
on the planet. I was in love with no one. I read *Gatsby* for the first time,  
and was alone in a way I'd never be again. From May until August, I worked

the grounds crew, planting flower beds and spreading mulch beneath  
a canopy of pine trees, preparing the park for CEOs, for two weeks  
of European money. It was easy work, and I was glad for it. At night,

I fell asleep with the light on, a book lying open, and, in the morning,  
rode the bus to Flushing Meadows, still wondering what Fitzgerald meant  
by *the consoling proximity of millionaires*. I never found out. It didn't matter,

really—I was out of high school, older than Venus, the same age  
Serena would be when she'd raise her first singles title above her head,  
beating Amélie Mauresmo, the future world number one, in a third set

tiebreaker at the Open Gaz de France—but when I came to the scene  
where Tom Buchanan, through *The Rise of the Colored Empires*, lays  
bare the nativist's science, an anxiety Fitzgerald certainly shared, I thought

of my parents, and my parents' friends; I thought of their Friday night  
card games, how my mother would extend the dining table with a leaf,  
and fill the refrigerator with cans of Budweiser, Baileys Irish Cream,

white wine, vodka, and cranberry juice. Then, she'd slice a fistful of celery,  
send me to the store for cigarettes. I loved the purpose. I loved the feel  
of those bills in my hand, and the promise of enough change to buy

a quarter drink, orange or red. I'd pierce the top with a pin, sit quiet on the landing as smoke filled the dining room, and the parents, all of them parents, would sit like sentinels in their chairs, gripping

over fewer jobs, reduced hours, bad backs and bum knees. *Neighborhood's changed*, they'd say. *Tell me about it*. And I can see, now, the shape of habit taking hold, so I'd like to stop here, to intervene on behalf of this moment

before it hardens into verse, and is made grotesque. It's June, again; the cherry blossoms burst beneath my window, a late blooming.

At the French Open, Serena Williams is one match from winning her sixteenth Grand Slam. She's favored, of course, but it's her power that's still praised, her brute strength, as if the game's impossible math were divisible by broad shoulders and a snarl. She's set to face Sharapova.

The city's split. *It is what it is*, Serena admitted. *At the French Open, the crowd boos, but they're young, they're kids*, she added, thinking back to California, to 2001 at Indian Wells, where the sold-out crowd,

retirees and baby boomers, serenaded the sisters with worse than insult.

Venus had withdrawn minutes before her semifinal match against Serena. Two days later, at the finals, walking down with Venus to the players' box,

Richard Williams turned to face the heckling crowd, nearly delighted by the scene, grinned, and raised his left fist in the air like a wild John Carlos. Serena publicly thanked him. She's never returned to defend her title.

But Roland Garros is somewhere else; Paris a second home. Serena lives several months out of the year in a two-bedroom apartment off the Champ de Mars. She bicycles the city, shops the open-air markets, her bookshelves

lined with leather-bounds haggled over beside the Seine. Last summer, she told John Jeremiah Sullivan that she comes here *to be around nobody*, to live alone, a part of the *Old World*. *It gave me the sense that she was*

*hiding there*, Sullivan would write, *hiding . . . from a country that couldn't decide if she was a goddess or a threat. And from her father*, he added, who years earlier promoted the girls as coming *Straight Outta Compton*,

a mythology sprung from the American century, because the work of representation is the history it maps, rhetoric carried like torches through the dark. Gatsby, for one, is never made to appear. He moves

through the narrative, *a fragment of lost words*, elusive, fading along what Barbara Hill calls *the horizon of significance*. But it is only after the *obscene word*, *scrawled . . . with a piece of brick*, is wiped clear

in the novel's final pages, a word Fitzgerald consciously omits: *kike*, or *queer*, or something worse, a symbolic order of the hen-hearted and dispossessed . . . It is only after Nick Carraway draws his *shoe raspingly*

*along the stone*, erasing the offense, that Gatsby can become a stand-in for us all. And those card games, how there is no word for a displaced fear, for disappointment still to come; how several of the players,

including my father, will not survive to contest this, so they sit here, mute as the furniture, forever eyeing their no-good hands, delaying the inevitable, caught in the instant before they can place their cards face down on the table,

and head to the kitchen for another drink.

## THE BRIGADIER AND THE GOLF WIDOW

Pigeon-toed, a heartbeat like grace notes since childhood. Arthritic,  
widowed in her forties, the absence fostered like an avocation, making  
her loneliness seem slight, though once, at the glad wedding of a niece,

while the MC thinned the dance floor by anniversaries, *twenty years*, then *forty*,  
then *sixty*, until one couple remained, in praise of fortunate nights, slowdancing  
through the high register of Lionel Richie's "Endless Love," my mother

left the indelicate hall in tears. Allergic to bee stings, to timothy grass  
and clover. Born among snowdrifts that cradled buses on Eastern Pkwy.  
I've left a book of yours open on the nightstand for weeks now, a torn paperback,

John Cheever's *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow*. I can't get through it.  
I can't seem to read past the story—the one I'm supposed to love—  
of that feckless man who swims his way home, his route mapped by

Japanese lanterns, a riding ring. To be honest, most nights I read little else  
but your inscription, *Miriam Walsh*, the cleft peaks of that *M*, the glen  
of your vowels, and the *s* asleep in the shade of telephone poles. *Miriam*,

from the Hebrew meaning "bitter," meaning a plight, and the namesake  
who sang freedom out of Egypt, chosen by your mother, though your father  
would balk at the denotation. *Walsh*, meaning "native," from the Irish meaning

"foreigner." *60 Autumn Ave*. I think of the assonance in that address, of how far  
you must have felt, at nineteen, from the midday parties of Westchester.  
Or Connecticut. Or wherever Bullet Park. Or I think of Mary Walsh,

variant on *Miriam*, your girlhood friend, struck and killed outside  
The Crow's Nest in 1967. Her mass card's still tucked into the mirror  
of your vanity. And beneath it, a black and white photograph, you and Mary

at the bow of a Stier house on Euclid Avenue. Mary's beaming like a film still.

Skirt suit and cloche, white gloves. I know so little about her; I've never asked.  
But you, you're off-center; you're looking past the camera, as if prescient,

as if you meant to leave. *Miriam Walsh*, bitterness, native and foreigner. In the fifth grade I was pulled from class by Sister Rosalita. My grandfather died six months prior, and my grandmother, alone for the first time in 53 years, sold the house, *60 Autumn Ave, B'klyn 8*, and started hearing voices. *Sundowning*, the doctors named it, *early dementia*. Innocent, at first: an overstuffed refrigerator, *my daughter needs baking soda*. Then, the unthinkable,

*my daughter's been killed in a car accident, tell the boys*. So when the Sister of Charity took my hand, and knelt as if beside a pew, an awkward reverence I'd come to resent, I knew enough to keep

my mouth shut. The dim hallway, the tableaux of hand-traced turkeys, of Indians and pilgrims on popsicle sticks. But what I think back on, what I see best is the covenant, the papier-mâché feast that ballooned

from the wall like an accordion. *How strange and fine to get so near to it*, to touch the hem of her habit, to lose something once, then retrieve it in the telling. My mother was fine, for sure, I was certain. My mother,

Miriam Black, her loss irretrievable, her name elegiac, "to pass undetected," again and again, who left her niece's wedding in shame. For years after, she'd visit her mother at Rockaway Park, Beach 115. Each visit the same:

my grandmother, lost in the discord of her memory, impossibly thin, would ask for my father, gone five years, gone ten. *How's Jimmy?* she'd ask, and my mother, without fail, each time would answer,

*He's fine, Mom. He's on his way.*

# THIS IS CINERAMA

Because the foot fractures, because the body turns soft. Because  
the mind says *six miles nine miles twelve miles*, and I haven't run  
in weeks. Because another relationship is ended, I take two Advil,

and go to the movies. A retrospective; the sixtieth anniversary print  
of *This Is Cinerama*, Lowell Thomas's love note to technology  
and travel. It opens with Thomas, in black and white, behind a desk

littered with paper, lecturing on a history of representation. Cave  
drawings, Egyptian murals, the Renaissance on the verge of motion.  
Then motion: Kircher's magic lantern and the zoetrope, Mathew Brady,

father of photojournalism, bringing his studio to the battlefields  
of the American Civil War. By the time Edison enters the narrative,  
Lowell Thomas has turned reverent. The Black Maria, the penny arcade.

Valentino and Banky. Then, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, he intones, sounding  
every bit the showman he'd become, *This Is Cinerama*, and the curtain  
opens, revealing a louvered screen curved in ratio to the retina.

It's 1952. Rockaway Beach. To demonstrate the full scope of their vision,  
the filmmakers have rigged their tri-lens camera to the front car  
of the Atom Smasher, the wooden roller coaster at Rockaways' Playland.

I walked its ruins as a boy; a housing complex, now. A shopping center.

But, tonight, its motored gears clack and catch as we climb the lift hill  
to a pan vista of the Atlantic shoreline, then drop like a bucket

into the first banked turn. The audience howls; they throw their arms  
into the air. The images are dizzying. The man beside me records  
the sequence on his cell phone. But the tone shifts by a long dissolve,

and we're taken to Milan, to La Scala and the Temple of Vulcan.

It's the first-act finale of Verdi's tragic opera, the grand set piece where  
Radamès and Aida will later be entombed. The camera's static, mournful.

*Culture*, thought Thomas. *Spectacle and sound*. And from there,  
the scale just grows: Niagara Falls, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,"  
sung by the Long Island Choral Society. Spectacle and sound. The tour  
of Europe, the Basilica San Marco, monuments to fallen empire,  
though somewhere between the Schönbrunn Palace and Zaragoza's  
Plaza de Toros, I lose interest, my mind wanders. I think of you.

Of your mother's dying. How I heard it from a friend, who spoke plainly,  
as if discerning the weather. We'd been out of touch, you and I,  
for more than a year, but I wanted to find you, then. To go to you.

To say something to a life without her. I wished I'd been there when  
you learned; a stranger to your grief. I was still a boy when my father  
died. Foreign to me, now, that loss was absolute, unadorned. And so,

it was manageable. I cried in spasms until I slept. A vexed relationship  
persists, I think. Nothing cools. When the movie ends, I sit slumped  
in my seat until the lights come back, until an usher eyes me from

across the theater. I want to show someone how they got it wrong.

*You missed the point; you got it wrong*. But I've been telling stories,  
again. I've been talking to myself. The truth is: I haven't been

to the doctor. My foot swells, but I haven't seen a doctor. The truth is:  
the film was screened *last* summer, at the Cinerama Dome in L.A.

And because the sun in California is the sun in California, because

New York is out of sorts. Because another relationship is ended,

I can think of nowhere else, no one else but you. We walked North Beach,  
talking about adaptations, about Flushing Meadows, La Flor Bakery,

about your mother, who was gone, and, what more, I can't remember.  
We said goodbye at Fourth and King, and the waning light made your face  
look younger. And knowing. Later, I followed the basin to AT&T Park,

bought a ticket from a scalper, in the left-field bleachers. There was no moment of her going, nothing to call back or contend. *You can't spend what you ain't got*, the song goes. *Can't lose what you never had*. I tried

calling in the seventh, but you didn't answer. The Giants tied it in the ninth, then won it on a walk-off.

# HOME BY THE SEA

*I can't turn around and put up a flag and say, "I have no place to go."*

Chief Dennis Diggins  
Bureau of Waste Disposal, DSNY

From bridge view, from snow-packed  
rock. Seagirt to West End. The crude

signs nailed to garage doors, inked  
on windshields, *Looters will be crucified.*

November: an Old World threat. A FEMA  
truck stutters by on a busted axle. Drywall,

plumbing, dining set, bureau. Nine days  
passed. At Fitzgerald Gym, two mothers

braid their children's hair with Vaseline.  
On state-issued cots below the free

throw line.

## **SKIP TO MY LOU**

Junior hustles near The Showboat  
playing Bitch for sneakers.

He's got a handle, can go left or right,  
through you or over you. They call him

Man-Child or Sweet Sweet-Jesus or  
Skip-to-My-Lou because he stands upright

and skips down the court daring you  
to reach. When his daughter needs milk,

Junior plays for dollars. He's got eyes  
like wet cement. Sticking Junior is like

finding your name in a graveyard.