

## Nostalgia's Not What It Used To Be

I'm well aware it's problematic to miss the ice cream trucks that clinked and tinkled down Candlelight Lane. The name "Good Humor" privileged bourgeois affability, and valorized consumption. Songs the trucks played—"Daisy, Daisy" and "Dixie"—legitimized patriarchy, women's oppression, and the Mariana Trench of slavery. My memory of Sterling

Roig, Bobbi Jo Smith, Carol Kamas, Clarkie Lauderdale blasting from houses, clutching dimes and clamoring, present as *facts*, subjective impressions of *friends* who may have cared nothing for me, or cared because of under-theorized notions of *neighborhood* and *kinship-of-the-same*. The products sold reinforced a Capitalist hegemony—

Fudgesicle (racist), Eskimo (not Inuit) Pies, Torpedo (military-industrial imperialist), Popsicle (no Momsicle), etc. The sugar in our treats deconstructed sweetness into cavities, obesity, diabetes. The (always) man in (always) white—who pulled, from the back of his condensation-smoking-truck, products iced with polluted air which our tongues melted,

loving the cold jolt—may have been a child-molester, exploited immigrant, or untreated dyslexic. What I remember as a smile, a laugh like Santa's, could have been a sneer, leer, or consumptive hack. The bond of signifier/signified, which I thought solid as Galveston's seawall, was slithery as New York City slush. No one involved

understood anyone else, which explains the time I asked for a red Torpedo, and got green. Red, by the way, evokes *strawberry* (a bruise), and farting *raspberries*, as well as Communism, which evokes the rapacious USA, its sacred texts indeterminate as the location of electrons in a quantum world where "truth" shifts like ants on the Klondike (raped

environment) Bar I dropped, so the vendor gave me (liberated from his corporate slave-master) another one. Maybe he cursed me covertly as the spoiled spawn of world-despoilers. Still, I picture how he climbed back in his truck, waved, and drove off, grinning, as dusk sifted gently down, while we exploiters of the proletariat, bellies stuffed with Mom's

counter-revolutionary cooking, licked our pelf, and resumed our games of jump-rope, doctor, Who's the Prettiest?, or Grand Slam, and on the last pitch of the day, I sent the ball sailing over Clarkie's house, through the warm suburban dark into a black-hole future that had been always already sucking what I thought was happiness away.

## Where Are You Now, Sally Woodman,

who won the spelling bee with *centrifugal*—  
who sang in church choir, and brought the most canned  
goods for starving Africans? You sat behind me  
from second to sixth grade, let me use your scissors

when mine broke, tore pages from your notebook  
when I left mine home, and when you had three Oreos,  
gave me two. Where are you, Sally, who hand-  
picked my Valentine, while I pulled yours

from the Value Pac Mom bought for the whole class?  
Where is your bobbed blonde hair, your eyes'  
morning-glory blue, your skin—*porcelain*  
Mom called it—that burned pink if I said “Hi”?

Where are you, fresh and cheerful as the Holsum Maid  
on our milk boxes—much better for me  
than Kimi Kidsen, I saw clearly when she gave back  
my dog tag, and I whiffed three times in a playoff game—

better by miles than Candy Sanders, who swished  
her ponytail and wiggled hips as straight as mine,  
scattering smiles like pink balloons among the boys.  
When, shaking worse than with the flu, I gasped,

“Will you be my May Fete partner? Please?”  
Candy chirped, “I’m sorry—Tommy asked first,”  
meaning Tommy Tucker, who couldn’t keep a beat  
if it was welded to his head, let alone sing for his supper,

but rode his chopped Ducati in high hoodlum style.  
Back I dragged to my sad desk, where Sally—blue  
eyes cast down—must have seen my spilled guts coiling  
on the ground, must have known I knew she’d be

my partner if I asked her to. “Why can’t you love  
what’s good for you?” I call down through the cruel years,  
and hear my voice from way back then call, “Why  
can’t *you?*”

## Vitus & Me

I was no saint,  
God knew; but I suffered through church to please  
my mom, preaching to myself, “Sit still, sit still.”  
I scourged myself with school, forcing my face  
into the chloroform of names, dates, conjugations  
while my toes writhed, buried alive in my shoes.

Better that  
than being racked, as Vitus was. Still, in my torment,  
I imagined guardian angels: herky-jerky  
Lew Burdette of the Braves; the bouncy boppers  
on American Bandstand, where “Itchy Twitchy  
Feeling” was my favorite song.

My parents promised  
age would cure my fidgets; they were wrong.  
Even now, my pulse shouts down the calm lyric,  
and blasts me toward the comic rhapsody, the frenzied  
psalm. That’s *my* seat squeaking at the movies,  
*my* head bouncing like a speed-bag as everyone  
behind me fights to see.

“It’s energy,” I told Dad,  
“Christ!” he said, and didn’t understand.

How much  
of Christ could the brightest eight-year-old understand?  
Vitus—senator’s son raised by Christian slaves—  
was torn apart for parroting what those he loved  
like parents made him say. (I’ll bet they promised him  
no pain.)

St. Valentine’s dance became a celebration  
in the vain, panting dark of high school gyms.  
Vitus’s became a disease.

At a play I paid a hundred bucks  
to see, I’m about to twitch out of my skin  
till I observe, behind me, a woman’s crossed leg  
jiggling crazily. Just one blue button keeps  
her skirt from splitting open past her knee.

She smiles, seeing that I see. A billion sperm start  
wriggling.

As we lie, later, in each other's arms,  
the state of grace poor Vitus died for, falls on us  
for free.

## Dark Penguin

After the oil spill, he's front-page news: a beak-faced,  
heart-sick Muppet who *fell into a vat of chocolate*,  
as the Lowes Bros sang to packed houses in the fifties,  
before so-called folk music fell from grace.  
Folks had more substantial molecules back then.

You could still meet an old black man cane-poling,  
and he'd call you *Son*, and knock you flat in the mud  
with catfish wisdom. But *Dem days done gone*.  
Feathered and tarred, our penguin looks depressed  
enough for shock therapy. Those scientists who say

only humans feel emotion, never owned a dog,  
a vindictive ferret, or ambivalent lovebird. They're no  
Einsteins, those scientists. Albert and Tammy Tortoise  
were a happy pair before a neighbor gave me  
a new female: younger than Tammy, more lineated shell,

a chelonian hard-body, which Al banged right away.  
(They really banged, shell against shell. Day after day.)  
Tammy took to her burrow, and died. My grandma  
died when Mom was nine. Death didn't hide in hospitals  
back then. Folk was the only music on the farm

where Grandma squeezed out her eight kids—three dead  
before cancer killed her at thirty-five. Mom watched her fall  
in on herself like a cardboard box in flames.  
The sight hardened: a lump of fear she passed to me  
like an heirloom that Goodwill can never haul away,

and no matter where you dump it, drags back home.  
Dick Lowes won't let his son come home since Dick Jr.  
played Taylor Bust in a porn film and made his mother cry.  
Mr. July, the Eastern Box on my *World Turtles* calendar,  
has an orange-spotted shell and crimson eyes like Torpy T,

crushed by a truck when I was ten. I cried that day  
the way I want to when July ends, and a Hawksbill—  
endangered—takes poor Torpy’s place. Dark Penguin,  
if it lives, will pass on its dark fears: orcas, great whites,  
gooey black seas. The days of virgin ice and endless

krill have gone the way of folk songs and *Dagnet*.  
I’d forgotten that show until, last night, an owl called  
*Who-hoo-who-hoo* like the theme. So long, Sergeant Friday.  
So long, “Just the facts, ma’am.” So long, husband  
of my friend Mary Ann, who stays in her burrow and cries.

In water, flightless penguins fly. They range in size  
from emperor (4 feet, 90 pounds) to fairy (16 inches, 2 pounds).  
The newspapers don’t tell the species of their cover-bird.  
Maybe its bird-brain had no hopes to crush and grind.  
Maybe its sorrow’s all in the beholder’s mind.