

## SELF-PORTRAIT AS THIEF CONFESSING AFTER THE FACT

At Jr. Mart, one eye on the mirror, I  
wedge my meal between skin and waistband.  
A quick shake of my leg and the microwave  
cheeseburger, cold as Nebraska, slips  
down my thigh behind my knee, trending  
south to the elastic cuff of my sweats.  
No one suspects an ankle. And my ankle's fat  
when I step into the parking lot, not  
looking back, two ounces of frozen beef  
with its dinky stamp of American cheese  
and a few gelid squares of diced onion  
thawing slowly against my calf. July  
sunlight on the gas pumps. Concrete dotted  
with dark wads of abandoned gum.

# MAKING A TURKEY SANDWICH FOR MIKHAIL BARYSHNIKOV

*It doesn't matter how high you lift your leg. The technique is about transparency, simplicity and making an earnest attempt.*

—Mikhail Baryshnikov, *Baryshnikov at Work*, 1978.

Because he finally appeared during my shift and I could see him beyond my prep window and the cold display and the cash register sitting at the four-top with Jessica Lange and their daughter, Alexsandra, I made an earnest attempt to slice the sunflower wheat bread with disinterested grace, to keep the crust unbroken before layering the smoked meat with lettuce, mayo, avocado, and three strips of applewood bacon, then cutting the whole into halves, perfectly tooth-picked gourmet doppelgangers of abundance and, one hoped, restraint. Fingers hooked in my apron collar, I watched as this table of three who represented a ridiculously large share of Earth's talent and beauty were served their sandwiches, or as I liked to think of them, their edible sculptures. I did not walk out to the forbidden gleaming customer area to introduce myself, a fan, an aspiring poet, a dishwasher and slicer of serious bread. I was not the Baryshnikov of poetry.

I was not even the Baryshnikov of sandwiches.  
And a family deserves to eat in peace, and I  
deserved to watch them, or I didn't, but watched  
anyway, though not ostentatiously. It wasn't  
easy to slice a fresh round of focaccia  
when I wanted to set forth in my hair-net  
and scream "Mikhail! Mikhail! I'm so happy  
you got free from nasty old Russia where a 5'5" male  
could never dance the lead!" In my salty halo,  
in my cloud of bread steam, I recalled  
childhood visions of an airborne jeté  
over pool halls and pine-tops, the water tower  
a train set figurine in the air beneath me.  
Of course, like most boys in Mississippi  
I was herded decidedly away from ballet  
toward football, hunting. I wonder, how many  
poets are would-be dancers? Name one  
good poem that doesn't long for escape.  
After they finished, napkins on plates,  
Baryshnikov's crumbs were everyday crumbs.  
Nor was the silverware infected with  
greatness. Such are the mysteries of genius  
and mastication. The oven bell rang, as did  
the order bell and the dish bell, all the bells  
that said the meal is ready, and the cake. Still,

with damp cloth and bucket, I stepped out  
and took my time clearing their table.

# MEDITATIONS ON A BOWL MADE FROM THE WALNUT TREE UPENDED IN LAST YEAR'S HURRICANE

1.

Sober, my dad liked to read  
    beneath the tree that the bowl  
        used to be. One day I climbed  
            the ladder with a bag of seed

to the bird feeder that hung  
    from its lowest branch. My dad  
        looked up from his book and said,  
            “You're about to bust your ass.”

2.

The nuts were inedible, plagued  
    with webworms, but the wood  
        is this chocolatey swirl of storm wounds  
            and bird dreams that I turned

by lathe and gouge and chisel  
    into this otherworldly vessel, oiled  
        and buffed to a dark glimmer, filled with  
            stamps, screws, capo, spare change.

**3.**

It's hard to impress a ghost. Once,

I made my father a clay ashtray.

It was impossible to clean and

went down the drain in ash-stained

clumps. If my father were alive

to see this bowl, I think he'd give it

to his AA group that it might brim

with dollar bills, a coffee-fund overflow.

**4.**

And then money would, in fact, grow

on a tree, even if the tree is gone.

The roots still bulge beyond

the ferns that circle the stump

that shows the sixty widening years

it took to turn a single nut

into a force for green, throwing

shade, gathering up the weather.

**5.**

Bowl, you are not my father. If you  
were a door to the next world, my dad  
would've hitch-hiked to the dog tracks  
with all your money. Still, with the whorls  
and loops of your grain's  
figuration, you might be a large catfish  
nosing toward the light, looking up  
at a bug striding across a stage of water.

**6.**

A bowl worthy of Greek salad  
at the thunder table of a famished Zeus  
whose brother rules the second  
life where perchance some measure  
of the tree still grows, if upside  
down, rending walnuts gratefully  
cracked in a windless realm,  
that bounty of glorious shadows.