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Practicing Jamie MacInnis

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# PRACTICING

*Jamie MacInnis*

TOMBOUCTOU 1980

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## SKYWRITING

Perfectly good words  
without any meaning at all  
can be written in the sky  
by airplanes full of meaning.

They leave behind them clouds  
or pictures of clouds  
or the word clouds.

In China skywriting is  
difficult and beautiful.  
They do it in black.

## CAMEL

The Arab children ride out  
on camels, their magic  
carpets rolled up behind.  
To them the desert does not seem  
unusual.

At night the moon  
paralyzes the sand  
and the sand becomes  
cold and bluish.

The sun turns it all yellow  
which is the color  
we think it should be.

## IMAGINARY PRAIRIE

Against the old sky the old mountains.  
They looked like tall men in cowboy hats  
before they invented tall men in cowboy  
hats. On the other side, water to match.  
A hidden radio played cowboy music.  
I didn't feel alone, building a fire  
whose flames were blue like my cowboy shirt.

## HAND SHADOWS

When all the yellow birds came flying  
into my fingers, I thought they were  
roses someone didn't want, the kind  
of gift an audience gives to its  
favorite violinist. But I'm not  
a violinist and they were not roses.  
They were birds.

## DUCKS FOR GROWNUPS

In the rain the white ducks  
picked up or took  
all the moonlight that was meant for water.  
No swans were needed. Ducks  
in the dark take all the light from the sky  
and all the underwater light and  
float between and  
dare you.

## 640 BROADWAY

Over the tops of all the trucks,  
the cars, the taxis, the people,  
over the top of the noise a tiny wind  
blew me some music from somebody's radio.  
It was like several small pianos  
thrown across the street at different speeds.  
Lucky my window was already open,  
for this was the music of siamese pianos.  
That's what it had to be : siamese pianos,  
playing themselves for me.

## SMOKING IN BED

You light the fire of day  
my cigarette  
my face is radiant with your light.  
Striking a match in the dark,  
the campfire girl in me  
gives me a light  
and together we watch the stories  
on the wall.

I learned to smoke on Pall Mall cigarettes  
but now it's Lucky Strikes for me  
the package so pretty  
announcing its name swiftly.

## THE BUDDHA

The laughing buddha  
white ceramic buddha  
the one with all the baby buddhas  
glued to him with Chinese glue.  
The baby buddhas are laughing too  
and one is perched at Buddha's ear  
to tell him some new joke  
to keep the buddhas laughing.  
These buddhas are the opposite  
of Queen Elizabeth the First.

## WINO

You know how it looks when the only light  
in a room is coming from an open refrigerator?  
Well, that's how it always looks at the wino's  
garage.

"Your car ain't ready yet," he screams at  
frightened customers from his cavelike  
doorway. Some occult carpenter built this  
wino, who is too drunk to practice magic.

"Every wino drinks too much," said the mayor's  
wife to her ladies. "Martinis are different."  
Thinking about winos had made the mayor's wife  
into something of a philosopher. At her  
"parties" people no longer played cards.

## EASTER ROBINS

At 6 a.m. on Easter Sunday,  
New York City, U.S.A.,  
a squad of Easter robins,  
hearts beating like tom-toms,  
join the big parade.

The lady birds, discreetly perspiring,  
arrange a tray of picnic worms;  
and pretty soon the worms are singing  
religious tunes of doubt and pain,  
which end with a shout of triumph.  
Thoughts of rebirth, resurrection,  
reincarnation, fill the heart  
of every worm and bird.

Swaying in unison the joyful worms  
stand on their tails and sing,  
"What wickedness, etc."

The march grows stately.  
Row upon row of chanting robins,  
many holding trays of harmonizing worms.  
Tearsplitting Easter robins on parade.

## SAILORS

Who knows what it's like inside the ships  
that pass in the night.  
The dark rooms may be darkrooms  
once you turn off the light.  
Do the sailors play music or  
what do you hear? Do the sailors make  
love to the sailors?

Inside the ships that pass in the night  
the men have ocean names. They earn them  
in the evenings, playing the ocean games.  
Dark green  
navy  
white.  
Who knows what it's like.

## EVERY LITTLE STAR

In flat Nevada  
& early California  
hills do roll.

Over and over the moon  
goes down, and no dawn.

Any more hills  
and there's no hope  
of morning.

In Reno herself  
in my sorry ear you whisper  
no sweet nothings.  
Sometimes I wish her whole face would  
disappear.

In Reno  
the birds have hand-painted wings.  
They float like ties  
in stained air.

## CAMBODIA

One of the ideas of meditation  
is an end to all pain.  
But as she went up in flames  
the yellow nun seemed to be  
screaming.

The body dies and the soul  
flies out between red wings.  
It reminds me of those  
lapel pins.

## JAZZ TO SPARE

A voice tells me there's  
jazz to spare. I don't  
know, it must be my own  
voice.

"There's jazz to spare,"  
it says, but when I listen  
to the music I worry that  
there's not enough to go  
around.

## MY GRANDFATHER

My grandfather had red  
hair which I never saw him  
wear, but which I wear  
a version of.

I am not interested in him  
I liked him he is dead. My first  
funeral was his first funeral.

## UNCOURTLY LOVE

Our footsteps are preserved  
in dry cement.

It was wet this afternoon.  
Fair play and sweet enough  
you look tonight,  
seeming to watch the sky.

Night and dreams  
still make the shadows  
that are underfoot by day.  
Stare, but never gaze at  
visible stars  
you have no shadow now  
you have  
what daylight forces to the ground.

## LOVE HEROES

We sleep only with those  
whose misery makes them our heroes  
and eat sandwiches together and  
go home on opposite buses. I  
didn't even know I was suffering.  
Whose misery makes them our heroes

## TENTH STREET

Little bird in lineament,  
the sun's brilliantine makes your wings incredible.  
Your feathers are mirrors for insects.  
And I'm glad about the tree behind my building  
tall enough to put you on its top floor  
opposite my window. I will watch you, birdie  
'til you catch on fire.

## VALENTINES

The lower east side is full of churches.  
They are like old-time valentines to god.

My next door neighbor is a widow. She goes  
to mass each day with the doors in her heart  
wide open. Storing up love as she sleeps,  
she is an old Valentine made of black wool.

I am a bright red valentine made by myself.  
East side bells are ringing, they say it is nine.

## EVAPORATED MILK

Re-incarnation. To live again  
as a shard of glass,  
all that is left of an early  
coke bottle.

My edges worn soft,  
I sit in the sand  
at Baker's Beach,  
San Francisco, California.

## LIFE UNDER GLASS

There's some kind of sunshine stored in my head.  
It accumulates.  
My head is a temple where schemers pray  
and you are the church across the street,  
addled and mysterious bells.  
The world in a paperweight.  
The sun pours its wisdom down on both of us.  
This is life, and we bow to it from the waist,  
comedy and tragedy pumpkins once removed.

## AN UNPARALLELED ADVENTURE

Oh God! I've found the monster's tomb. It's all  
red boxes, empty.  
They've left the temple in a lemming stream.  
Tonight their trails glow near my room.

Dark animals behind the fence. I'm told they  
aren't armed. I'm told they're also rather gold.

This institute of animals isn't what I care for.  
It was almost a dwelling, a game in a book, this mad urge  
to tell you a story.

No, you read to me. I beg you. Read about the animals  
we used to know. Toad Hall. Soft animals, and talkative,  
as we once were.

Get me my French tin cups with flowers on them, they  
are my pets. My ears! How they buzz with the tomb noise.  
Three "doctors" want to operate. Are detectives  
at the tomb yet? I beg you, read to me from the Book  
of Childhood, here by my bed. My little bed,  
that used to be my brother's.

## ONE FIFTH AVENUE

Why is this hangover different from all others?  
The answer is four hours sleep.  
It is not a hangover yet. But stay!  
I have formulated coffee and spoken on the phone.  
Beginning a hangover is like beginning your third  
drink while formulating your part in a conversation.  
Sometime during the third drink you change brushes,  
needing the broad one.  
Along the bar someone on drink nine returns to a  
small watercolor brush.  
Someone else a lead pencil, someone else a pen.  
I was watching a woman choose between two men.  
Another drink was formulated down the line.  
There was animation from drinks four through nine.  
The woman continued to choose. I did not envy her.  
The men were getting similar.

But it is morning now and I have formulated coffee  
and spoken on the phone.  
A spider has travelled the length of the room.  
It's morning and the woman who chose is getting  
smaller.  
Why is this hangover different from all others.  
The answer is in drinks four through nine.  
May I be excused?

## THE TEAM ROOM

Welcome back, team-team, you seem  
ah glasslike. And those two silly girls  
who know them?

Way up in the team-room, tall, fine women seat you,  
a good boy's mother, comin' up. And there are cars  
that murmur 'round the park. They say it's Spring,  
my team-team. We will train you to play. You, in  
Filmland, in a filmy negligee.

They also run, who sit at the edge and wait.  
We will ask them to clean the team room, using team  
shirts as bait. Under the sidewalk is blood.  
You are blessed by its red, and a fine understanding  
of teamwork by cops. We will ask them to play.  
If they stay, they'll be slain.

## THE BARRETTES OF WIMPOLE ST

The sidewalk is shaded by gracious trees  
and every morning the sidewalk has on  
a pair of plastic barrettes, torn  
from the cardboard quickly  
so there's cardboard in their teeth.

Sometimes red ones, shaped like hairbo  
or palest pink of imitation fruit.  
The rare yellows are like bows and  
arrows.

## ON THE WATERFRONT

There's a song in my heart pop pop the phone  
rings I envy the ones who don't have to answer

It's a merry life, though, is it not? Three  
robins harmonize on an ol' spiritual. La

la la but the truth hurts, and the truth is that I'm  
pissed off! You and your High Art I spit on it.

Yet I and my love have a place by the water.  
Look out this window, the water is silver,

with grey, grey gravy on top. We will rely on it  
and it won't let us down. Do you hear that,

water? The answer was muffled by the shut window  
but it was clear. the water said no, I hear nothin'

I'm water. I only work here. A big fish rode by and

winked. Trust this water, the wink implied,  
it will carry you through.

You mean a flood? I asked. Could be, could be,  
could have been the answer.

Could be something good, too, could be somet  
good.

## WHAT IS

a conundrum? Is it when one is confounded and thus reduced to hitting oneself, with the flat of the hand, on the forehead?

Or what about sex? Is it a form of birth control? Or is it throwing caution to the winds in a special container?

Did Wilde produce conundrums are they like flowers? Flowers, with the smell of blackened tweed. There is no progress sans a dictionary, not today, but what

is a conundrum? I ask you, what? Can it be a bonnet or the ornament on it does one wrap a chicken therein? And then, the oven. I swear, I don't know, unless...it's a wrapped Tahitian lady's dress.

## TRAGIC MAGIC

"How come you look so ratty," he asked diffidently. "No makeup, stupid," I answered, holding open the door. He carried his bike in and leaned it against the wall. He was always carrying his bike.

"He only had twenty dollar bags, so I got two of them." He put the foil-wrapped 'bags' on the kitchen table. "Glass of water, please," wryly efficient, and, "Where are the works?" and, "Boy, do you need a new point. Why didn't you tell me before I went to ninth street?" And, "Where's the cotton?"

*Heroin is a plot to enslave the minds of the proletariat.*

This statement is always accompanied by that little drawing of two people at a kitchen table, ex- ex- ex- ex- ex- ex- ex- ex- millionaires.

## ON RANDO'S BIRTHDAY

Rain on the radio. Criminals  
of the north send greetings by phone  
and lost bats flutter in the courtyard,  
their nights governed by nostalgia.  
The smoke of a thousand campfires is thought of  
and forgotten. A man with long, wet hair waits  
by the radiator.

Dark transfers of weather have twisted this day,  
and infinite rain pours on this birthday  
of raindrops. A Japanese doll sings in the  
howling bookcase. Lost bats spin  
into the shape of a black umbrella.

## FANTA

What kind of drink is this?  
My Fanta.  
I drink to you as I drink you,  
deepest Orange Soda made today.  
I toast you with your bottle  
excellent in itself  
and clear glass  
through which I see and wonder at  
the richness and the cheapness of  
dark summer color. No return  
is embossed, no deposit.

## WHAT I WEAR

I see what I'm wearing. Red accents.  
My haircut is from the Dutch Boy  
paint ad.

In the bank a Black boy told me  
my haircut was authentic. He had an  
Afro.

The bank teller, a woman, looks  
just like Jonathan Winters,  
that's how she wears *her* hair. You  
realize everyone is famous.

## NOT FADE AWAY

Cooper Union after dark.  
I'm looking for a way to mention it.  
Remember jacket head?  
Who does he think he's not?  
Remember the rewards of staying indoors  
on a sunny day?  
The sound of children in the courtyard  
beating each other up.  
Remember Cooper Union after dark?  
The skylights lighting up the sky.

Remember driving back from Maine?  
Your brother's hated rug?  
and the fall of night last fall  
on East River Drive?  
Remember the moon over Imperial Envelope?  
Teenagers playing basketball along the river.  
Remember the music emanating from the cables?  
Shine on, car radio. My thoughts shine  
on the years spent getting rid of everything.

## SEN-SEN

Slow folk, kissing in public,  
show a human tendency to love.  
Sen-Sen, if there's a man  
using my blue pen, do I reserve  
the right to interview? A fishy taste  
of cat's breath hangs in the air,  
and Lilacs age in a brown jar.

The peaceful way young girls eat chocolate  
in front of buildings, maple trimmed.  
Their beaux await them. They will drive away  
in caravans of ancient Chevrolets.

The arcane trousers of the rather young  
(you wear them). Arrggghhhh, Spring! and if a  
tree falls on us, as we walk in the woods outside Boston,  
let its blossoms cover us let us hide in the fumes.  
Lie down. Without question you may borrow my blue pen.

## JIM & EDITH

sit at a table  
with friends. Her cigarette  
smoke curls in his half-closed  
eyes as though smoke were the  
intoxicant here.

I love this nightclub photo  
taken by a camera girl.  
It shows them  
as they saw  
themselves:  
independent operators.

Surrounded by a group of "in-coolies"  
impeccably staring inward  
eyes white as diapers.

Utter partygoers without gossip,  
they like to dance. They like to insert  
a joke. They like to smoke.  
A picture of natives, one carries  
the other in her arms.

## CHINESE MODERN

ney Toler with his  
Confucian deductions  
I pagoda eyebrows  
gave us Charlie Chan  
the way Olivier gave us  
Hamlet.  
an was a famous detective  
who showed his son  
ropes.  
"Someday, my son, all these  
things will be yours."  
Opulent hotel lobbies,  
formous conga lines, nylon  
stockings, easy  
rivers, Florida.  
Chinese modern.

## IRISH MUSICIAN

The train starts by accident  
leaving Washington D.C.  
A flowered kimono lies wrinkled in my canvas  
The rays go dim as I travel east  
out of your frequency.  
You are like me  
You admire people who like you.  
I read your book  
*The Beautiful Indifference*  
looking for clues.

The train starts by accident,  
stopping in Newark.  
Here, there's a neighborhood,  
Down Neck,  
where people have grape arbors in their yards  
next to ivy-walled factories.  
Old Newark.  
A man with a banjo sits in a chair.

The train starts by accident.  
Big flowers.  
A businessman tells me his story.  
The train tells its story of people  
having a drink at 80 miles per hour.  
The factories go by telling their stories  
in billboards and a hundred tiny windows  
talking at once.

## DRY SHAMPOO

I was nineteen, no longer living "at home", a terrible snob. My parents cordially invited me to dinner, one evening, to meet the poet, Carl Sandburg, who was staying with them. Sandburg's kind of fame irritated me, but I condescended to attend. Sandburg turned out to be an incredibly handsome man, with thick white hair, and a bitter folksiness that suited me fine, though he hardly spoke to me. Finally, I asked him something about his writing method — embarrassingly — and he replied that he never washed his hair with soap and water; only dry shampoo.

## BOO HOO, MY LOVE

This March day has my own fitful brightness,  
the sky suggesting an upset person pacing back  
and forth across a room,  
obscuring the light source repeatedly.  
They're playing "96 Tears". Listen,  
someone's excitable telephone.

They're playing "Angel Eyes".  
My power is all around me and under the rug  
and I'm in love with your autobiography.

I used to love parties, I followed them everywhere  
in a state of grace. Listen.  
Ten years will go by in abject silence,  
but first they play "Boo Hoo, My Love"  
to lighten the decade.

## SLEEP

A man is sleeping.  
Look at his face. His eyes  
are not quite closed.  
Come closer.  
Jesus! How can he sleep?  
There's a rampaging gorilla  
behind his eyes!  
The gorilla lurches forward.  
He grabs the bars of his cage  
and shakes them, glaring out  
through the sleepers eyelids.  
The man will not wake up.  
The gorilla sits down in despair.  
It's quiet everywhere.

## WEDDING POEM

When it happens,  
marriage is everything.

Everyone knows that Carol  
is beautiful and smart.

Everyone knows that Steve  
is beautiful and smart.

We admit secretly that this is  
important.

And we are glad that marriage  
is not democratic.

We only see this marriage of  
two people, beautiful and smart,

And larger than life, right now,  
and about to resume at normal size.

This weekend they loom large.  
I see Steve in leather jacket

And clogs,  
and Carol in boheme sandals

Eating wonderful meals,  
swimming,  
talking at a small table.

They are bathed in a light that  
pre-electric.

*for Steve and Carol*

## PRACTICING

*for Tad*

Dear friend, I know you're sick of me  
remote as in valium  
Almost really angry.  
Certain nights you find me in the "other room"  
with the death aura on me.  
Am I what I am the way a person limps  
into accountancy, a case of  
post-dated self-love? But dope aside  
our friendship is as good as any  
on the eastern seaboard.

Once in California there was such a friendship  
overruled by natural disaster and put away  
for later.  
Later, there's the me who loves you, dope aside.  
That me despairs at your despair  
and disapproval, and disappears.

## LIVING UNDER SACRED HEART

For a while, I had a magical interest in going to Mass.  
I would go at six o'clock, leaving the house in the exciting  
darkness of November mornings.

I was a student at the Convent, then, and the nun I loved  
was Mother Lowry. I had even discovered her name: Clair

Her brother, and this is the insane part, was the priest  
at Saint Vincent de Paul, where I'd attend these Holy Masse  
just to look at Father Lowry's hair. In looking at Father  
Lowry's hair I could imagine the hair of his sister, which  
was covered by the black veil and pleated, white coif of her  
nun's habit. There was only her face, small and glamourous  
and her bony hands.

After six o'clock mass in the golden church, I'd have hot  
chocolate in a shop, and walk to the Convent. Mother Lowry  
would be there, ready to teach us girls' basketball, at which  
I excelled.

## SCIENCE

### *Locating the Soul*

Maybe it moves from place to place  
igniting your eyes for a second,  
then hopping onto someone's shoulder  
as the light falls from your face.  
A sponge with small wings,  
it can live in a tree.

### *Big Love*

Do you realize how fame works?  
It predates the world's recognition.  
It exists in people as the soul does,  
non-medical and odorless.

### *The Fluid of Fate*

Heroin gives you its dreams  
and takes yours away  
in a crocodile bag.  
We are the headwaiters of the Nile,  
if you take my meaning.  
Our tears are those of the mighty crocodile.

### *Monster on Campus*

I like it when the monster  
still has on his everyday clothes.  
Like the white jacket  
the young doctor wore  
when he ingested the fluid of fate.

### *Rays*

TV can be sweet  
if it's not pointing at you.  
Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches  
lit from within.

## RICHARD

Last night I slept in a boy's  
parent's bed. This boy was in there with me.  
Fluffy quilt.

I have an endless adult past.  
I know two guys named Richard.  
One of them I call "this boy".

This boy weighs 130.

He is 18. I wink at myself in the mirror  
as if I were kidding. Tomorrow this boy  
will drive out of my thoughts.

My thoughts. Ahem. They make me cough.  
The cough.

Now there is only one Richard  
and he will be gone before long.

## HOUSE AND GARDEN

It seems I spent my childhood  
in the Presidio and backyard,  
picking lilies in the dark.  
Martha in her white uniform and I  
in my kid's uniform of white tee  
and jeans, going home with armloads.  
In the tree fort I kept a pink hair-  
brush and a hand mirror. My velvet  
doll was old enough to be my mother.  
Inside my life there was me,  
digging my way to China, guided by  
my mother's finger of light. The years  
were a long, white day, the nights  
as narrow as a child's bed.

## MARSEILLE

I saw four junkies on the street today.  
They were strangers but I knew them,  
wanted them to take me along.  
My lips drew back from my teeth.  
How do they shoot their dope in Paris?  
In Marseille? In New York anymore?

The men who make the wind  
are knocking at my window. There's a  
grinning face on the fire-escape, lit  
from within by a candle.  
The candle has one eye. Imagine  
a bonfire. A bonfire has six rooms.  
I wish the mayor would give me  
the key to some other city.

## CHANGING CAT

She is black with long white  
gloves, and there is little  
outside of books and mirrors  
that she doesn't see into.  
Sometimes her ears are like  
bonnets and her eyes  
yellow garnet. Navajos call magic creatures "changing".  
It means they come in parts.  
When I see spilling ink  
in my house, out of no bottle,  
it is always changing cat.

## THE BEAUTIFUL POEM

begins on my birthday.  
I get some perfume  
and there's no way  
to put it here. Also  
Rudofsky's book of  
covered sidewalks where  
my perfume belongs.  
A watercolor from Bill  
shows Bill with a candle  
looking in a mirror  
at the portrait of a woman.  
The perfume is here, too.  
The New Yorker will be mailed  
to me every week for a year  
thanks to Larry, and in it  
my perfume is advertised.  
The new year is shining on the table.

## COLORED GLASS

A blue paradox resides beside the lake. What  
do I mean by that, exactly? The blue represents  
the hothouse flowers, planted years ago, in a  
plot the size of a pier-glass.  
The artist putters there.

The paradox is difficult to ascertain. I mean  
it's not a paradox when someone plants a flowerbed to  
match a lake, say.  
The paradox is hidden, maybe, yonder underground,  
where farmers buried bottles in the bottles' youth.

As if at sea, the farmers wrote their messages in ink  
as dark as life beneath a flowerbed.  
They put their thoughts in bottles,  
and mailed them in the earth. A mob of thought, a  
paradox, my blue idea of a blue idea of a farmer after dark

## MUSIC

I believe in Smokey Robinson. and Fats Domino? Fats too. His "wind in the pillow-case." And there's an alphabet of Zoot Sims. Many stay up all night, singing.

The El was an influence on these men; that, and the river, with its bridges getting smaller as you go north. There's a green bridge, just for looks. Narrow and suave as an evening shadow, it could be covered at night with an evening glove. Didn't musicians flock to the bridges?

It's a big night of stars on the radio. A school of singers listens. I follow the man who stands beside a burning Christmas tree, singing Kiss of Fire.

## REAR WINDOW

I swear by music, it was an idea of a summer night. A tenant played rhapsodic piano for the tenements. I was a perfect audience, pretending to sleep under open windows, and Victor, sleeping for real, laid music on his dreams.

I sat like the north shadows, deja deja vu, waiting for news. The dream is everywhere in dots of red and blue on black, and cables pulling elevators everywhere.

Even the city's endless piles of skulls are standing in for life. In the morning, a block of light on the fire-escape is solid as a person, and real as the sleep we are gone in a dream of.



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