

HER FRONT YARD

is her pageant, the generous woman down the street  
with her garden gnomes, and Dutch kids who disappear  
into the garage at night, still  
kissing. There's some bluebirds nailed  
to her trees, two wishing wells, various other animals, some  
watering actual flowers who live beneath a tribe  
of smiling spiders. From May  
to September, two more kids stay on a frozen swing,  
impossible to steal during any hour of the year.

Then the scarecrows come, the  
vampires, mummies, and then several Santa  
Clauses, the wise kings, shepherds and candy canes.

Depending upon the season, skeletons, small, revering  
cows, and even smaller leprechauns, but never  
once a woodland nymph. She's  
grateful when someone  
praises the show but  
that's not the point. Anyone

can decorate a lawn. She wants  
to tell us something / because at night she's  
stood on the lawn, stood  
there naked except for  
the flame.

THE BLUE BALL

It would take about one and a half  
crows wing-to-wing to surround  
its circumference — the blue  
ball on the grass. Twilight, a prairie

lawn, and the ball's an unscratched  
mirror holding stark and bluest  
trees, a small arch of sky, the house  
steady behind me, but not  
my son. He's over  
there, way over there, in primary colours, rubber boots,  
two hands on the garden hose, he's playing  
at good work, playing firefighter, even playing  
at being me. I ask him to come give the ball  
a drink, and then he's off  
again, bending over to

take in the pleasure of water and the invisible  
spiders that water and mud  
make. The ball uncurves  
its vista fresh again, a miniature exempt  
from geometry's collisions, the home  
that can't ever be met  
for the first time.

2.

Because the ball is more  
than any woman a siren, because  
the unjourneyed world only  
lying on its skin wants me  
to discard everything, I step

back, regain the pale shuffling  
of actual dimensions and my son's  
hardly there

I see him  
a mirage as if at the mind's edge. He's abandoned  
to purpose and I wander

3.  
around the yard, touching a spruce  
he sprayed earlier, force my  
eye along the lemon of a warbler on the back fence, the bird  
granting sudden lineage to the wood's  
cracked paint. I shoot an entire roll

of film, some of it in colour, some  
in black and white, some in surrender  
and this condenses the entire  
thickening world down —

a patch of skin  
swabbed by a nurse just before the needle. And we,  
this world's unguarded skin, are its  
rainy breath, its always changed

upon blood / and we choose  
its wind-stretched  
light.

ASLEEP

in the curl of her arm chair my Pentecostal grandmother  
flew through her Alzheimer's like a parrot  
back to her century's beginnings. Flew past the gray-crayoned  
hours, back to before work and long womanhood, flew through  
silver  
spoons, past summer's inward bridges, flew back to a point  
before Satan started watching  
from his corners.

Pears were for eating. Then steaming and canning.

Then finally something shaped like a ball.

But there were no children. Where are the children?

When she'd awoken, minutes would arrive like alien chopsticks  
from a place  
she'd never visited. Food became unusual and then empty, not  
good  
for much at all.

She'd only seen a parrot once. It was a jeweled Ukrainian egg.

She's known beads that were real, and something that looked  
like a heart  
made of amethyst, a word she'd  
never learned. In the back of her house  
there was a dark and crowded space  
with a block of wood  
and an axe.

This is where she killed chickens for supper.

The earth floor was damp with an enameled smell, her apron  
the colour of fish in a field of wheat.

Flashes of sound. Few.

Flashes of sound. None. All

in one place, all in one

place.

But that, near the end, she ceaselessly  
polished her fingernails  
with her young woman's thumb.

DESERT ILLUMINATIONS, 2003

*Saturday, April 5*

Writing from this bestiary — a shark  
closing in on a spray of roses, peach  
roses, a sea turtle sliding down  
the widened aperture of a box

camera, a chameleon resting on  
a thick clump of words —  
there's nothing I wouldn't  
tell you

if words could give  
me your presence.

*Saturday, April 12*

But first, look  
at this nearly empty  
page. No, you have  
to look much

more closely, the margins  
are troubled with things  
trying to get in —

some thin pictures from  
last week's newspapers.

My eye is so slow. First I saw  
the child's arm, a  
bandaged stump, and then

there was his other arm, just the same, though  
severed higher,

the caption mentioning  
dead parents, he's 12, which means he was born during  
the first desert war. And the same bombs  
released a man from jail, his chest made  
a parchment by knives, sharpened  
screw drivers, some cigarette burns / his  
crime: stealing flour from the ruling  
Party — he was a baker; he'd  
been gone

*Saturday April 19*

ten years. This week seemed hardly to budge, though  
the mutilated boy went on television, the baker  
vanished, and inside the other facts, the  
casual verities from which  
the eye must choose:

tomorrow is this year's Easter, or  
a man with a beak curving down (filled  
with potpourri) and upraised broad hat  
spoke terrible things to me from the end  
of his circled world, he's a replica of a Medieval doctor  
in a local museum exhibition on microbes  
and plagues, or

last week I bought a history of tattoos. Among  
the hearts, flowering snakes, sometimes beaming  
icons, and the extraordinary number of skulls, an artist  
from Samoa gave someone's skin perfectly  
tasting panty hose from knee to eternal  
thigh / another had sewn diane

18 *Michael Trussler*



IRAQ: OPERATION SHOCK AND AWE, THE NEW SUBLIME

I wish Kant could have seen  
the stranger down the hall, the one  
watching CNN today, the one getting  
turned on taking in the computer's  
night-scope-green, this new light  
making way for bright mossy tanks, rapid  
spectral men — the so many  
desert machines.

Both hands  
wrapped around the computer screen, she's  
a believing Christian, an even fiercer  
mother of two, a boy, a girl, still  
babies mostly, which means  
nothing / neither love  
nor God ever  
altered anyone.

What's really important  
is this:

she knows the correct names  
for all the weaponry, can identify  
each unit of soldiers, hones in  
on each target / and she knows, she  
knows that she's  
part of the team.

PORTRAIT WITH ARBITRARY SCENES  
AND ACCIDENTAL ANIMALS

Amidst the most extraordinary fire.

You asked me to choose. Choose between rebellion  
and unguarded wonder, burials at sea or  
beneath the drum-beaten sky.

So I've been led to gather and scavenge  
for things. Examine them.

2.

First with my fingers, from the waist up — these streets falling  
away resemble women, I thought. And I learned to see with  
my stomach, where the nerves gather, found a run of blue  
desert — the fixed and myopic sky — to sit beneath.  
Sometimes animals came by, recognizing how I cared about  
things. The unbroken game back then being to strike down  
the need for any kind of deal. Not to give what's due, neither  
to Caesar or God — this was to see how the word *or* suddenly  
candles beauty amidst our Ptolemaic thinking.

3.

That was twenty years ago, before I knew  
that most of them would be spent  
living in potent but fake shadows, sometimes overhearing  
voices sip at my brain.

In between these twenty years — marriage, doctors, a job worth  
keeping, necessary drugs, the dazzle of children, and  
now divorce — a useful and fortunate life that hasn't  
yet vanished. Or flared.

This remembering everything but not the right things.



SALVA NOS

One morning in summer a man's ribs opened up  
and out came a girl. No, that's not what happened. Instead,  
this: once, in a long, and mutable, a carnal summer,  
a crow visits.

Flies down from the mast  
in the parking lot. Flies down  
because she can't resist  
an open window, can't keep away  
from the plush heart you gave me, the one that  
I've tricked her into thinking  
is meat. It's only ten

o'clock in the morning, and she's already  
pecked July's wet stars from the carpet, shown  
me a boy in a blue bottle. *Once, he'd  
pulled a wagon, a red one (as it should  
be) and in it a bushel of gray  
fire — the immediate and contented ash  
of a roaming childhood.* It's only ten

o'clock in the morning, and the crow, she's  
hidden my wedding ring, leashed  
my desire for other people's memories, and just now  
she tells me that many floors above  
someone's collapsed while washing  
last night's dishes. She's

insistent with impossible facts: that each day,  
past and future, presses its claims  
on this one. And fluttering among

my blow-up dolls — Venus  
de Milo, Piet Mondrian, and Ganesh — the crow  
finally lands on my robin shell  
bed. She's summer incarnate. Its unexpected  
stairwells, waving ferns, a moon  
made of moss. But up close, her shadow's  
  
a guillotined halo / and as for me, perched  
on the shelf of what actually happens, I'm merely  
  
a clump of what's vertical in a season, a space  
that's crowded with flight  
and emptied of touch.

AT THE CIRCUS TODAY

Sigmund Freud must have invented the circus.  
Babylon's beside Barnum repeating the uneven present, and  
everyone  
keeps jumping through rings. After he's already  
sacrificed her once in a rocket, the Ringmaster chains a woman  
inside  
a moving doorway. Spread wide, she could be waiting  
for Kong. And then, she's sealed away from  
the rest of us. The ringmaster taunts  
the motorcycle between his legs  
before bursting through the doorway  
in sparks, exploding paper, and Wagnerian  
guitar. The woman needed to be  
destroyed again if she's to uncurl once more unharmed  
from her velvet box that's glowing with stars  
and the rings of Saturn.

2.

I don't know anything about elephants.

But at the circus today, from way, way behind worn down  
headgear, and desert folds around her eyes, one  
looked at me. She could tell she was  
in front of everyone and she was  
also breathing in another world

and when she gathered me in her eye my shoes first and then  
the rest of me began to disappear. And then  
she went around the ring again tagged  
to another's tail, her skin a map that kept moving. Her scent  
rubbed

the popcorn, the green smoke rippling with stage  
lightning, the barking crowd, and each

3.

new poem desires to hold fast to reshape different kinds  
of love / but then the sudden world occurs, sweeping apart  
every street. Because the roar carries us away, throws  
anchors down where no one would ever want  
to stay, I first had to give

you the circus's falling noise / only now  
can you meet the elephant's touch. When she  
pushed me down into someplace else, your  
fingers came from behind and lifted me, then wafted us

both nearly to the top of the tent. The circus went

on as if we were only  
missing, but the elephants drew us  
down, gave us

their million wrinkled pathways  
to follow / and

4.

it's also true that everything —  
everything is done, everything  
to avoid rehearsing  
the dirty velvet of your  
receding voice.

## THE CONTORTIONIST

Being a contortionist is enlarging work. It's also tiring — embellishing the extent of the literal. Each pose shows her leaving home. Each pose occurs amidst the fluid materiality of other people. She's observed skeletons bursting with their secret lives inside, studied clerks in sex shops, the past century's stage directions. She's watched her dentist's fingers, neon signs and bats. Her body is a love song to St. Sebastian. Her

impossibly raised pubis is an anvil upon which summer's last butterfly is made. Parallel to ours, her body contains what escapes memory. Her skin sometimes glares a car's headlights sweeping through country roads.

Her repertoire is endless.

Her act has included a man sleeping on pavement. The uncollected rocks on the moon. A day trip to Auschwitz. Ladders on toy fire trucks, what dolphins really think.

Merely to listen, she takes daily excursions into stairwells. Without an audience, she scratches her scalp, resolves to eat only carnivores for a week / without an audience /

her body's knowledge is tireless.