Mythopoeia: A Biography

David Corliss
CUNY City College

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Mythopoeia: A Biography

By

David Corliss

Mentor: David Groff
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts of the City College of the City University of New York
NARCISSUS AND ECHO

***

ADOLESCENCE
Firsts

The soap trickled like her fingers
tickling across the back of my hand
exploring the trenches
cut by my tendons for tufts of hair.

That afternoon in the lunch room
while our legs played like serpents
her hand slid the promise
of permission into my pocket

but in the shower that night
before knowing the pleasure
of diving below her lace
I reenacted the pleasure of being discovered.
Winter

The snow fell
   like shallow breaths
   against the apple of his neck

their chill nibbling at his nape
flushing his face
   like a drop of hot wax.

The shovel’s first thrust
ccaught on a buried shelf of ice
   he pressed again, a dry sweat
building against his sternum,
and broke through.

That resistance passed
the shovel scraped across the pavement.
T-Shirt Poem

I’ve got this shirt that says:

Fuck Politics
   I just want to
   burn shit down.

I wear it to church sometimes.

Living in the suburbs no one says anything to me, just whisper.

   (You know, normal stuff like how my generation is going to hell)

As if a sample size of me is a good indicator of things.
I guess there’s that Kids News on channel 14 too,
the jail bait who does the weather dresses like a slut.

Anyway I’m definitely bringing that shirt. It kicks Ass.

I wonder if anyone would pick me up wearing it?

I bet a kickass Anarchist would.
He’d spot my pink thumb and
pull over on I-87,
   heading up to Canada to score some medical grade
marijuana Hardcore punk blaring from the radio
shaking apart
this real fucking beater.
His inspection sticker
Five years old and dogeared
clings to the windshield by some miracle of 3M technology

I climb in, pushing some crap from off the seat
   (You know soda cans, fast food wrappers, some chick’s panties)
Behind me the Anarchist’s Cookbook’s on the floor with bits and
pieces of pipe bombs and a dirty needle or two.
Then he’d lean back and be like:
   “You like blowing shit up”
and I’d be:
   “Hell Yeah”
Just to take the edge off

the words tap dance into existence
like coca cola to caffeine soused receptors
and each click stomps on a pulsing veins
painting my temple in hues of migraine

the kettle bleats
long flushes of steam
across the slats of sunlight
screeching until I open its throat.

as the tea steeps
the cat awc vdgberfb nmyhhj,okli
across the keyboard and curls in my lap

one slow sip slips across my tongue
and pools in the back of my throat
I hold it
the warmth lingering against my uvula
then I let the floor drop out
rushing the chemicals in

my shoulders relax
and the structures
wrapped around my cranium release
Does anyone make-out in Borges' Library?

The stacks echo
with the haze of cliched
kisses between two co-eds
up too late studying calculus.
   And as I put Garp
back on the shelf, I remember
our nights bickering about
Irving,
   how he could make us both laugh

but he was too heavy handed;
his prose hurling recklessly forward
dragging along plot in a manner betraying
   his story, betraying his themes, constructing
order where order didn't belong,
displacing the absurd.

At some point, with my tongue
wrapping around the phrasings
of Fitzgerald
   your tongue slid between my lips
and America's debts
to Dickens and Dostoevsky,
and all lands north, south, east and west
were forgiven.

The cliched haze of history swallowing my arguments.
Petters are what dogs call hands

She doesn’t pet, like the grand children pet, aggressive, face in my face, petters tangling my fur, giggling as I lick the sweat and snot and scraps of food from their mouths,

or like her son pets, hurried, distant strokes, delivered from on one knee, his petters working over my crown, muffing my hair,

but rather, she pets in soothing, long strokes like the kind you’d use on an anti-social cat, the arthritic petters starting at the base of my neck, flowing down my spine, and trailing off over my tail.
Alice, the mother won’t take it anymore

The nurse's look lists across
the lobby. I sit on the other side
of the bulletproof glass, reading
last February’s National Geographic
while the security guard eyes me
from the corner, imagining: to be here

I must be easy.

We would walk home together
cutting through the woods
on Kinns Road. The first
time I kissed you a baby
jay fell from her nest. I begged
you to climb up and place it back.

but
“the mother won’t take it now”

And so you bundled
the bird in your shirt and carried her
to your bedroom.

And while you nursed me
on your lips, you knew

her neck was broken.

That winter, with your parents
on a train into Manhattan,
beside empty champagne
glasses smelling of sparkling
cider, we built a nest
by confusing my hair
and your arms, and binding
the hollow of my ribs to your chest
with sweat,

filling all the gaps
   by pretending
   for one night,
   we were adults.

That night
   I felt your
   heart beat
   inside me.

One garbage-day a month
my father, would find my trash
filled with discarded pads stained

   with menses. He’d stomp around
   like he was handling biological
   waste, my mother would shake
   her head, and I’d run to my bedroom
   mortified.

   this month we’d do nothing.

The speaker discharges my name
in its rasping metal voice
and the electric bolt hums
before clicking open.

   On my way in, I see you waiting in the parking lot
   with a bouquet of plastic drugstore flowers.
Sabotage

It was just a gulch,
before we knew what a wadi was,
sagging in the shadow of the old millwheel.

The silt smells like waiting
for the school bus the morning after it rained,
when the earthworms were still soft enough
they’d smush into streaks of dirt
as you wiped them from your hair.

We bury him beneath the mill,
swaddled in a faded Minnie Mouse
beach towel we found forgotten
in your sister’s suitcase.
Marking the spot by wrapping my sneakers
around the axel of the waterwheel.

In the spring I visit,
the riverbed now swollen with runoff,
and stop, listening to the water tumble,
turning the wheel
on a thud
(the same sound as shoes in the washer)
as a piece of detritus
drops against the waterlogged wood.
The moon rings…

The moon rings
    buffaloing its fall.
The stone’s light races
unbridled, lacing through the blue,
cracking against the spit +
swarming along the strand.
IRL

We sit against a dune.
his arms wrapped around me, cradling
my figure against the white sand kicked up
like snow by a winter squall.
As the wind dies, we’re joined
in watching the sunset over the ocean
by crabs the size of border collies.

And if the programmers
bothered to make an emote
allowing him to slip his hand down
the front of my blouse
he’d be typing /fondle
to play with my breasts
as we speak.

I’d /shock
pretending to be annoyed
even as I led him lower.
His fingers twitching around my clit—

At my chair I unzip my fly,
giving my erection space to breath,
my body once again interrupting me.
**Grain of sand**

They were married on the eighth of May
with the fat rain drops falling
on the oil slicks
outside of St. Michael’s,
forming dark rivals
to the pearls
dangling from her wrists.

Together they bought the house.
Her garden outback
where she could work
with the sun on her neck
and cold earth in her hands
and he could watch
smiling from the kitchen.

They vacationed on a Maine stone beach.
The sky greyed and the surf kicked up
by the dying remains of Hurricane whatever.
She sat on that beach
writing

Start with
a fragment of
personal truth
then let
imagination
cover it like
mother-of-pearl

while he played
in the waves.

She lost
him
as a wave
crashed down
splitting
his head
Paralyzed from his thick Adam's apple down
Strapped in a chair with a tube through his throat
and only speaking with his eyes.

Still she loves him and

Is this true?

She needed more and so she sent

Is this fair?

I don’t know
She’s out of my control
but

I believe
she’s out in her garden
living for those days
where she thinks she spots him

smiling from the kitchen.
SISYPHUS

***

THE ROARING 20s
My mother taught me manners

That girl talked like she was auctioning off
a thousand head of cattle
her shot gun tongue stamping
each word with her particular southern twang.

I should have said:
   You remind me of sipping sweat tea
   on a summer evening while looking out
   from a porch overgrown with yellow jessamine.

But my Yankee mouth wanted to blurt:
   You remind me of downing bathtub gin
   on a flat-bottom boat swarmed by mosquitoes
   and rednecks noodling in the reeds.

So instead I asked: “You from the South?”
and let my gaze drift that way.
and let my gaze wander that way.
Melanie

Her tit felt like poured cement rising in relief, stippling the flesh around her nipple like the skin of a plucked duck.

But it was quite a bust.

I wanted to play softball
dress one up in my baseball cap
and see if I could bash the other for a home run.

Or, I could try to snake my way between them (sneaking my way out undetected) but I’d trip-up in the dark.

I’d have to put on an act.

take measures to deceive her,
do the pee-pee dance, convince her
I needed to use the bathroom, and run far away.
They enter as the cashier rings up my lactose free milk.

I don’t see them at first,
just the scrunched-up, soccer-mom look of disapproval
on the face of the woman across from me,

Hercules spots them right away though,
his eyes darting up from where his stump
twitches at the edge of the grocery bag.

His face flashes with a Neanderthal lust,
as he produces a comb from his pocket.
He drags the teeth through his course, blond hair,
tucking the stray locks back with his clumsy nub.

The girls strut, single-file, up the aisle next to us.
The first, scuffling past the PEZ dispensers and tabloids,
but her friend lingers.

The cashier groans at the show,
but Hercules works quickly and, in a display of his retard strength,
takes the overloaded bag into the crotch of his arm
and settles it in the cart,
while I hurry to produce my credit card
before she vanishes.
**Bisected Shark is a good band name**

Materials:
Tiger shark, glass, steel, 5% formaldehyde solution.

A Japanese Woman
uses her phone to photograph the placard.
The whole scene reminds me
of my time as a shop boy, ringing
up the freeze-dried fish with a price gun.

And I know it’s pointless
to bitch about Damien Hirst, after all
by now he’s probably reinforced
his pinna with gold, replaced his cochlea
with diamond clusters, and fashioned
a new eardrum from Angora wool,

all in some statement about
the sacrifice demanded by art.
The Greyhound or when I learned about aging gracefully

Vie slaloms around the trees.
Her legs fold beneath her and load her haunches
until, she uncorks, and launches herself forward—
each stride vibrating along her ribs.

I follow her circuit from the kitchen. The crash
comes as I chisel last night’s chicken from the skillet,
and I look outside, in time, to see her collapse
in a shower of leaves at the base of the tree.

She awakes muzzled on the kitchen floor,
and harnessed between my knees. She strains,
twisting and wrenching against my clasp, whining
as I clean the bark from between her milky eyes.
Fox hunting

The anachronism guiding
the procession of black Mercedes
through the streets of Wooten
Bassett, glows from my laptop
here in Worcester, MA.

Yesterday was he at home,
in the SE of England, lounging
in a Polo and a pair of jeans,
with his Nikes kicked off
in the mudroom,

Or was he already dressed
in his dark suit, his eyes furrowed
beneath his top hat, leaning
on his cane, when a police officer
in Afghanistan shot five British Soldiers?
I’m tired

tired of waking up,
tired of the dread inside those moments
after my head strikes the pillow
but before I push off
when I know I’ve escaped today
but this surrender
it only hurries along tomorrow.

I’m tired of the looks
the ambitions
the sacrifices

I played the game
then Hilary-care came
put me out of business
so don’t talk to me about my best interests.

I’m tired of the accusations
as if my flesh were war paint
as if I’m some conquistador
angling for a split of the spoils
as if I didn’t have to escape that corpse of a mill town.

I picked cotton in Texas
learned Spanish from the migrants.
My grandmother fled Armenia.
Did your grams ever sift
through a mass grave
to reassemble her child?

But hey, the Jews have the holocaust
and the Turks are our friends
who needs to muddy that water.

Fuck it,
you’re after a devil
so I’ll tell you what
I’ll let the fags marry
if you give me my guns.
December 25

1996
The whole drive we whinged like crated cats
being dragged away from our new toys.

“Just remember he’s family”

mom always reminded us,
idling outside our Uncle's building
until her message sunk in.

2010
I answer the door in my underwear,
a ring of scales tracing the elastic
around my hips.

You don’t push your way in but idle
outside the door. You note each of my sores,
each sunken rib like a historical marker.

“We’re family”

I sag at the incantation, as meaningless
to me as “open sesame,” but mom’s conditioning
kicks in and I step back and let you in.

The room felt dark
even with the lights on
like an eclipse,
and we recycled the musk
of three month old laundry
and mold through our lungs,
while the stink of Stoli
and cigarettes burrowed into our skin.
1996
First thing, mom opened the shades
closing off the bay window

and we clambered onto the bench, suckling on the
cool, crisp air seeping through the seams.

2010
As you won’t leave I find a t-shirt and a pair of jeans.
You sift through my cupboards
searching for something to feed me.

You set a pot to boil on the stove and you circle
pitching trash into the bin, and fishing dust
from beneath the couch.

I pull the vodka from the freezer, but stop,
settling for a glass of water with dinner.

1996
The window overlooked the old park.
When it snowed we’d try to track
all the people below wandering
around the tree by following their footprints

but Christmas in Watervliet
usually meant rain.

I used to think I stayed
because I was stronger than him

but I’m not
this disease
is in our blood
and it needs me
to infect
Get out.
Get out!

Still, usually we found someone out there in yellow, rubber galoshes playing in the mud.
St. Peter’s

A water stain blistered the wall into a contorted face. I sat in the back of the church (the dark suit riding up my arm exposing the pink flesh of my wrist) listening to the afternoon’s rain tick against the leaded glass windows. My father sat in the first pew, his arm tensed around my grandmother’s heaving form. And at the front of the church lay my grandfather, a loose stitch dangling from the corner of his mouth.

From behind the alter, a water-pocked face stared back at me.
**Sleep**

She wipes
the trickling red bolt
into the faded blue-white skin
of her inner thigh.

Around us the city aches
under failed textile looms
and a century of revitalizations,
restorations and gentrification.

I follow her through the broken
back window of the Meadows Hotel, carefully slipping over
the sanguine glass.

From Main Street to 787, a park
scabs over the raw foundations
of fire-trap tenements
and wooden, mill town shanties.

I chase her in the gutted basement.
Wading through the air grown fat
on alcohol stains
and cigarette butts.

The bright new park buttresses
the tattered storefronts of Main Street,
whose fresh façades cover
plywood windows and foreclosure signs.

In the corner is a damp mattress
stained yellow with the sweat
of previous generations. And it is on their filth
I can find peace in her warm center.
Washing Machine! Liberator!

She harvests quarters like wild berries
salmonberries, or gooseberries,
maybe chokecherries.
Sometimes,
like right before her folks blow into town,
they become truffles
and she needs a swine to sniff them out.

Other times,
they become domesticated
and she can pick them from the loose change
growing in the window box.

It’s in these easy times when she reflects,
staring out from her station
atop shoulders stooped over riverbanks,
on how sudsy, washboard fingers
must have struggled to grasp a pen.

But that only leads her
to how productive she could be
with a dishwasher.
Stomach Cancer

It’s brave to be ordinary.
To wake up at 4:30,
and dress quickly in the dark.
Your hands stumble over the cheap
plastic buttons and absently
smooth the wrinkles in your shirt.

She glances at the crack in the wall
and the paint flaking around it.
I thought it was a spider web.
He yawns and tries to glimpse
himself in the window.
Then I noticed the color,
bright pink.

“Like Pepto-Bismol. You showed me this morning.”
That’s right. Can you imagine?

It’s brave to be ordinary.
To stand above your son’s bed,
stroke his hair and steal
a kiss goodbye, before you sneak
away like a thief afraid to wake
the house before his chance to flee.

You waved to me;
You waved and jumped from the high board.
I was so scared
She peeks over her shoulder and leans in.
That’s when I knew you’d be successful.

It’s brave to be ordinary.
Take the Empire Service into Manhattan.
Your fingers flip through the Gazette
until you drift to sleep.
You wake outside of Croton alongside the
tattooed corpses of the freight cars.

It’s gotten bigger.
Her pale eyes stare past him
to the pink crack, her hands absently
smooth the wrinkles in her blouse.
Your father would have told me
to paint over it, but it’s useful,
it measures my time.
“Mother, don’t be morbid.”

*It’s brave to be ordinary.*
To be alien on native ground,
and walk into your mother’s den
where a pink sliver has grown,
and the overfed branches sprout
fresh pepto-bismol blossoms.
ORPHEUS

***

LIMPING TOWARDS MATURITY
Pioneer Species

We spread out across New York like lichen
inching over a vaulted stone catacomb,
smuggling into the claustrophobic
crypts with century old plumbing
indiscriminately switching from hot
to cold
hot
to cold
scalding and freezing like
an old testament immune system
for a corpus playing possum
punishing us for taking
the performance too seriously
fighting back as we tear down its bloat
molecule by molecule
like lichen opening the vaults
molecule by molecule
back up to the sun.
Caligula in the washroom

He lathers his hands
watching the water blister
and burst against the stopper.
    For he’s a jolly good fellow
    For he’s a jolly good fellow
Steam splashes from the basin,
in the mist his capillaries engorge
like participants at a bacchanal
    For he’s a jolly good fellow
He scrubs beneath his nails
producing one last stash of wine
and draws the revelry to a close
    That nobody can deny

He pats down his hands
their flush already puckering
and pregnant with the memory.
Bird in Space

Bronze
Reflecting Flight
A wing
Anchored to the ground
That
For a moment
Carries you into the air
Until
The sound of:
People
And Cars
And Jackhammers
And Sirens rushing by
Return
You
To this World
156th St.

The night percolates
through a quarter-inch crack
in the window sill, carrying on it:
the particulates from the fryolator
at Corporal Chicken,
the voices from the alleyway
talking at each other in a gyre,
laughter,
the click of acrylic nails
against bingo cards,
garbage trucks, jack hammers, sirens;

and I wonder, if having sex
would make us exhibitionists.
Hand Writing

1. Next time you write, feel the formation of the letters. Does the force flow from the fount of the pen scratching at the surface of the paper and through the arm, tracing itself along nerve fibers and fanning out along the surface of perception?

2. She asks me to choke her, and as I clamp down around her carotid she begins marking up my back, until she fills the page and we both release.

3. Or does it start with consciousness signaling the muscles to apply pressure to the tip while shifting the pen’s placement, constructing the gentle form of each letter?
The Bachelor

How these women can bicker.
You can see the claws protract.
But cats have a barbed penis,
do they have any idea what they are in for?

You can see the claws protract
as the prey wanders beneath the Shoe Tree.
Do they have any idea what they are in for
those moments before the alley toms attack?

As the prey wanders beneath the Shoe Tree
(before its fruit had bloomed),
those moments before the Alley Toms attack,
could no one feel the violence on the air?

Before her fruit had bloomed
they circled and had sex.
Could no one feel the violence on the air?
The shrill sounds pierce the windows?

They circle and have sex
— but cats have a barbed penis —
the shrill sounds pierce the windows.
How these women can bicker.
Play

coiled in the curl of her tail
traced in the echoing flip
of the black tip
like a paint brush
blocking in
with tomato sauce

clippped
his head swallowed
by shoulders
recessed to his gullet
collapsing like a star
amongst splintered glass

she relaxes violently
he supernovas
tumbling backwards
the whorl ricochets down the hall
hissing and spitting limbs
all the way to our bedroom door
Accomplices

The SoCo splashes across my esophagus, drawing fresh words from the membrane rubbed raw by mucus dripping from the passages above.

Her gaze drips with the sensuality of too many Skinny Bitches, and her voice hangs like a child’s as she recounts a tale of mischief to her accomplice.

Outside, the snow falls flat and wet against the pavement. The slush sniffs at our ankles, and gets under foot us as we navigate the sidewalks.

She dances for the traffic light, bouncing the bangles about her wrists. I watch, and breathe the cool air across my wound, soothing the ache.

At home, we pile our wet clothes by the heater and collapse to the couch. The smell of damp cotton and sweat melts into the apartment,

and with her hair matted to my face,

I begin to imagine pressing my hand between her thighs, tasting the skin of her breasts, the texture of her tongue—

but the room is spinning, and our damp bodies, warming each other back to room temperature, tempt me into sleep.
The Voyeur

He sits there staring at you on the toilet,
those grey sweat pants down around your ankles,
his favorite toy resting against your slippers
waiting for you to throw it, but
you go on being constipated
and ignore his coos.

Desperate, he paws at your leg.
You respond by releasing the biggest fart.
He scurries off, stumbling over my feet,
as he panics through the door.

Your stare follows him then,
like a haggard monarch, you look to me and ask:

“How do you love this?”
In a moment

Her chest seizes
as if sparked by a defibrillator
and she lashes towards me
stamping the adrenaline
from my glands. I pull her tight,
feel her veins flood.
Palpitations buffet my sternum
dislocating my senses. I struggle
to separate the smell of my saliva
from the perspiration on her hair.

We brace each other through the spasms
until spent, she sighs,
“I hate you” into my chest.
nero in the moonlight

i’m going mad
i can feel it
the wire stretched too tight.
maybe i can make some music.

i will go out as i am
and i’ll watch it burn.

i see it! i see it!
but i don’t feel it.

still i see it
the plastic siding
curling beneath the flames
i can always hear it too

the wind tickles my testicles
i laugh
and laugh
and laugh
and laugh

if i had a fiddle
i’d fiddle and fiddle
on the hot tin roof
and all around me the world would burn
but all around me the world does burn

fiddley-di
phidely-dig
dance a jig
and stick a Pig

we’ll roast him on a spit

you bring the wine
and i’ll bring the wafers

all around the mulberry bush
something happens
and the world still burns
the world still burns

i think i should shave it’s getting itchy.
Class ends at the bell, not before.

The model’s dimpled tit sloughs off her chest, rolling over the knob of her knee like raw dough. Her ginger hair ignites in the cascade, but falters against the stretch marks matting her stomach.

A girl traces the goose-skinned flesh onto a fresh sheet. Her leavened breasts poke nimbly through the white cotton of her top, as the alchemy of her delicate arms gives life to charcoal dust.

Above them, the hot air shafts continue to tick.


**Over**

At low tide,  
beneath the caw of gulls,  
when deserts slope under the piers  
and mirages floating on oil slicks  
break up in a sea foam slop  
around the algae coated balustrades,  
and the playful cabals slink in the shadows  
beneath the surface of the water,

where the weeds spread out dead  
on the beach stinking of salt,  

as I walk through the sop,  
its viscous sucking at my toes,  

you look back  
and hunt for me in your wake.