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### Mythopoeia: A Biography

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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  
caught 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

Fiveyearsold 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 clichéd  
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 clichéd haze of history swallowing my arguments.



### **Petters are what dogs call hands**

She doesn't pet, like the grand children pet, aggressive,  
faceinmyface, 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 axle 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

on the rocky  
floor.

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 coarse, 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

**156<sup>th</sup> 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

clipped  
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.