

JOSEPH BATHANTI

*Zippo*

At the kitchen table on Prince Street –  
newspaper spread to appease my mother  
as she treadles in the next room  
the Victorian *Singer*,  
his wedding gift to her –  
my father removes  
with a tiny screwdriver  
the base of his silver Zippo,  
and fits the nozzle of Red Devil's Lighter Fluid  
to its cotton batting port.  
On his little yellow tin –  
*From the Dome Chemical Company,*  
*Cincinnati 9, Ohio* –  
the cartoon *Diavolo* brandishes his own lighter,  
its flame, arabesque, poised to torch  
a recent batch of the mortally sinful  
hurled off boxcars arrived in ghetto Gehenna –  
my ultimate destination,  
says Sister Sarah, my first grade teacher.  
Coal black goatee,  
beaked nose like a linoleum knife,  
paunchy, with tiny breasts, he crams  
like a sausage a red leotard,  
red feather flaring from his oily black Sicilian ringlets,  
punctuated with two little hornlets –  
almost cute – though he's deceit and torture:  
*DANGER – FLAMMABLE*  
*HARMFUL OR FATAL IF SWALLOWED.*  
*Keep out of the reach of children.*

*Epiphany Run*

Fleeced and wicked against high winter,  
I set forth on my daily office

from Shadyside Inn, Fifth and Aiken,  
where this fortnight I've cloistered

in Pittsburgh attempting from memory  
to draw afoot, in eight inches, this crude map.

19<sup>th</sup> Century black mortar slab sidewalks  
pock into moonscapes, seized-frozen

this interminable solstice.  
This city, where I learned to walk,

I run by Braille, half-blind, vision blurred  
from a scratched cornea,

then my worrying it.  
Through the smudged lens,

I squint through the glass darkly.  
The world idles and blurs into the hushed

addle of running: how things appear,  
how they might be – my version.

Amnesia inhabits my eye.  
When I search the stark behind it –

like the arctic outer in Kubrick –  
my wife's face will not materialize

in the Carolina Blue Ridge deep,  
a blizzard shivering our Vilas vale,

fourteen inches in the swales.  
She's at the keyboard, email

after email, telephone clamped in her neck,  
orchestrating her mother's doctor visits,

prescriptions, aftercare, customized walker,  
litany of meds, cautioning against the fatal error,

checking off the list another appointment –  
hearth-fire dwindled, her weeping pink

flannel challis. Invisible even to myself,  
500 miles from home, I beat against time

and space impenetrable,  
the alabaster ether separating stanzas,

running at once toward and away from home –  
the muffled Requiem of the 5:20 Capitol Limited,

southering on frozen rails out of Penn Station  
along its route of icy forgetful rivers:

Monongahela, Youghiogheny,  
Casselman, Shenandoah, Potomac.

*Communion at the Rehab*

The chapel's a bit like those Reno clip-joints  
where the tipsy eloped rouse the Ordinary  
from his hangover to marry them.

Four rows of blonde pews and a slab altar.  
Snares of stained glass in the shapes of starfruit  
on either side of a Maltese cross.

A baroque thirties horror prelude pipes in.  
A Liberian priest,  
his vesture white with an emerald cross

that plumes him like a green-breasted crow,  
transubstantiates the oyster  
cracker and white grape juice:

the body and blood of Jesus dietetic,  
safe for the sodium-restricted,  
the toothless diabetic.

At each wheelchair he hovers  
and holds to blue lips  
the hexagonal host and plastic shot-glass.

"This is the body, this is the blood,"  
he says in his anapestic lilt.  
Nurses navigate among the congregants,

bibbing them, nudging their cheeks  
to keep the Eucharist from clotting,  
patting backs to clear the trachea.

From their IV trees hang emaciated bags  
of crystal drip and happy face balloons  
the color of Gauguin's *The Yellow Christ*.

*For Frank O'Hara*

The first day on East 24<sup>th</sup> –  
we have a loft, #117 –  
in Gramercy Park, it rains.  
Through a delicatessen window,  
we watch the water fall,  
the sidewalk darken.  
We eat dolmades and scour the papers,  
decide on a Jacob Lawrence retrospective  
we know we'll never make.  
The Met closes at 5:30.  
No umbrella, we walk a few blocks  
in the rain to Curry Hill,  
its cadre of Indian restaurants.  
Slapped to telephone poles  
are posters advertising *Bodies: The Exhibition*.  
Skinned men, cadavers,  
leathery red, white and blue insides,  
denuded circuit boxes, stripped,  
like water colors, bleed in the downpour:  
swinging 9 irons, jogging,  
bolting up-field, cradling footballs,  
more determined, more cheerful, than the living.  
We settle on The Curry Leaf:  
pekoras and samosas with fiery apricot chutney,  
Kingfisher and rice pudding.  
The deferential charm of the Madras waiter,  
the white cloth across his sleeve,  
finger bowls. Outside the restaurant,  
a Cambodian sells Fire-thorn, Gladiolus,  
dyed carnations, Baby's Breath, vulviform  
Cymbidium orchids.  
He hands bouquets to people passing in the rain.  
Bright yellow the queued glistening cabs.